

Phish Fanhood: Phish.net as a Distinct Virtual Fan Community With Offline Significance

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Introduction

The band Phish, founded in 1983 in a college dorm, holds a strange place in the popular culture of modern music. Known for their experimental 'jamming' style of music, Phish has never enjoyed widespread popularity, yet they have a large group of extremely loyal fans, leading to tremendous success with live tours. This devout fan following comprises a unique group of individuals from geographically diverse areas that share a common interest and often common values. Using newly emergent media and communication technologies Phish fans have created internet-based communities that act as centers for information sharing and social support. The focus of this essay is one such group, Phish.net, which labels itself as "for phans, by phans." I will determine the site's status as a community, explore the norms reinforced online, and establish the effects resonating offline. As Henry Jenkins states, "...fandom has both been reshaped by and helped to reshape cyberculture."¹ This essay will go beyond looking at how fandom and cyberculture intersect and delve further, into how this established online fan community and information hub generates coordinated action from its members in the offline world. By first analyzing previous works on Internet communities, this paper will establish Phish.net as a legitimate, distinct community. Next, using the structure of and forum posts from Phish.net, I will outline the values reinforced by this community. Finally, I will apply research on the offline effects of online communities to evaluate the extent to which Phish.net influences members' actions offline. I argue, based on previous research and the analysis of Phish.net's virtual community, that this site is an online community with defined norms and a considerable impact on member's social and political views offline.

¹ Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, (NYU Press, 2006), p.5

Establishing Phish.net as an Online Community

Since the rise of computers and the onset of the Information Age, there has been scholarly debate over whether emergent online social groups count as 'real' communities. Many of the arguments against 'fake' communities cite geographic locality as a requirement for communities. However, it is clear that the notion of geographic locality being essential in community formation is outdated in a globalized world. Modernity has led to increasingly dispersed social networks. Individuals belong to and interact with many communities² and lately the term has become more associated with social networks than isolated, geographically local groups.³ As Steven Jones, a theorist on online community, remarks, "It is worth asking how often we feel part of a global community compared to a more local one."⁴ The idea of a small village society based on face-to-face interactions is antiquated and unrealistic; it is no longer the only way to build community. In retrospect, the nature of community began to change long before the Internet age. 'New' technologies such as the telephone change communities⁵ the Internet is merely the next step in the evolution of community from the idealized pastoral village to the modern world of Skype and Facebook.⁶ Using this perspective, community will be defined as "networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity"⁷ for the purposes of this paper.

Speaking to the nature of online interactions as a form of both public and private communication, Nancy K. Baym succinctly captures the power of the Internet as a community-building tool: "[the] overlap between interpersonal

² Wilson, Samuel M., and Leighton C. Peterson, "The Anthropology of Online Communities," (2002), p. 455

³ Wellman, Barry, and Milena Gulia, "Net Surfers Don't ride Alone: Virtual Communities as Communities," (1997), p. 2

⁴ Steven G. Jones, "Information, Internet, and Community: Notes Toward an Understanding of Community in the Information Age," (SAGE 1998), p. 7

⁵ Wilson, Samuel M., and Leighton C. Peterson, "The Anthropology of Online Communities," (2002), p. 454

⁶ Barry Wellman, Jeffrey Boase, and Wenhong Chen, "The Networked Nature of Community: Online and Offline," *IT & Society*, 1, no. 1 (2002), p. 153

⁷ *Ibid.*, 153

and mass communication provides the potential for otherwise disconnected individual voices to establish a community.”⁸ The web is able to bring together a diverse group of individuals from different geographic areas, that otherwise would not have a community in common. Applying the definition of community to Phish.net’s extensive forum makes it clear that this site embodies Baym’s theoretical conception of the web as a perfect tool to create a sense of community among disparate people. While the site contains far more than forum threads and a chat room, including song histories, live shows/setlists, and a store, this essay will only focus on those aspects that are involved in member-to-member communicative practices.

As a computer-mediated communicator, or CMC, Phish.net inherently features the sociability and information components of our definition of community. The forum by definition is a sociable environment and used as an information-sharing network. In his chapter, “Why We Argue About Virtual Community: A Case Study of the Phish.net Fan Community,” Nessim Watson describes the other components to the definition. In the section, *Intimacy and Population Growth*, Watson examines the site’s requirement that all users have an I.D. that attaches to any and all posts.⁹ This use of I.D. relates directly to the social identity component of our definition and indirectly to the availability of social support for users. Phish.net’s requirement that posters have an account with a user-id means that all members of the site must create a virtual identity, which inevitably develops into an online social identity. In a recent thread titled “We Don’t Really Need Money, Corporations, or Laws,” the second responder, Wonka, addresses the Original Post (OP) directly, saying, “I understand you (rabblenans) have a persona to maintain on .net (and btw you are my favorite .netter)...”¹⁰ The acknowledgement of social identity and its importance in this thread strongly supports that

component of community. Similarly demonstrated in this thread post, the creation of a social identity lends itself to members creating relationships with each other as they communicate using their user-ids. Another example of the formation of relationships is forum threads like “Public Speaking Advice,” which further demonstrates that users of Phish.net rely on the relationships they make online for social support.¹¹ In this way, the site offers support similar to that of an offline community to its members.

For the final component of this definition of community, a sense of belonging, one major factor indicating its presence on Phish.net is the popularity of the site. If Phish.net were unable to successfully create a sense of belonging, it would not be a popular forum for fans. Looking beyond this basic logic, the sense of belonging on Phish.net is evident in the tone and subjects of many forum posts. One example is the thread titled “1st ANNUAL .NET SECRET SANTA- Giving & Receiving,” which organizes the site’s first ever Secret Santa.¹² The thread engages willing members across geographic distances in a gift giving exchange. The presence of such threads indicates that there is a strong sense of belonging to this virtual society; indeed events like a Secret Santa are often thought of as community events, specifically because they foster a sense of belonging. In all of these ways, Phish.net firmly establishes itself as an intricate, distinguished Internet community, according to our working definition.

Defining the Norms of the Phish.net Fan Community

Now that Phish.net has been established as a virtual community, it is necessary to define the norms of that community. By analyzing the inherent structures of the site as well as forum threads posted to this online community, I will uncover the behaviors and values constructed and reinforced in this environment. Previous work on Phish.net by Nessim Watson has revealed some of the values purported on this community. While Watson studied Phish.net’s socialization of norms,

⁸ Nancy K. Baym, *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*, (SAGE, 1999), p. 13-14

⁹ Nessim Watson, “Why We Argue About Virtual Community: A Case Study of the Phish.Net Fan Community,” chap. 4 in *Virtual Community: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, ed. Steve Jones (Sage, 1997), p. 108-111

¹⁰ Wonka. “we dont really NEED money, corporations, or laws.” (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

¹¹ “Public Speaking Advice” (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

¹² “1st ANNUAL .NET SECRET SANTA- Giving & Receiving,” (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

his study was published in 1997 making it rather outdated. Since his chapter's publication, Phish.net has changed in many ways, expanding its role and influence. The non-profit Mockingbird Foundation has adopted the site, greatly changing its form and function. These changes warrant a new examination of Phish.net, including the norms and values of the site and the site's influence offline. For these reasons, my analysis of Phish.net remains highly relevant.

Existing research indicates that there is a definite process of socialization found in online communities. A recent study on User Generated Content (UGC) examines the mechanisms that initiate new members into a community and encourage those new members to participate in the sharing of information. Specifically, the study focused on the ways in which member feedback can affect new member activity and the expectations and goals new members have when joining a community. The results of the study confirm that processes of socialization are at play in online communities much the same way they are in offline communities. Furthermore, this study is significant in thinking about Phish.net because it reveals that not only do members influence the community, but that they are also invariably influenced by the community.¹³ Going off of this study, it then becomes clear that UGC communities, of which Phish.net is one, have a clear process of socialization contained within their content and structure. By analyzing these features of the Phish.net forum, the norms of the site can be uncovered.

In her work with r.a.t.s. (rec.arts.tv.soaps), an online soap opera fan community, Nancy K. Baym explores the acceptable cultural practices established in this particular social group. In relation to the nature of online communities she finds that, "It is to meet the needs of the community, needs both given and emergent, that standards of behavior and methods of sanctioning inappropriate behavior develop."¹⁴ This statement holds true when applied to the Phish.net

community. In his work studying the site, Nessim Watson examines how the needs of Phish.net have led to the adoption of various ideological and behavioral norms. Watson investigates how the natural growth of the website clashes with the desire to maintain an intimate community leading to standardized norms. Old members' concern over the growing size of Phish.net's community led to the formation of various norms for behavior aimed at preserving the close-knit community feel of the site.¹⁵ Thus, the emergence of Phish.net's community norms can be seen as stemming from a need to maintain intimacy, connecting back to Baym's framework for looking at norms.

In addition to outlining the emergence of online community as a product of need, Nancy Baym also describes in her work on r.a.t.s., how the structure of online community has a tremendous impact on the communicative practices used by its members and on the norms that those members reinforce.¹⁶ Similarly, the structure of Phish.net lends itself to the adoption of certain norms and the rejection of others. For the analysis of the structures of Phish.net, the focus will remain on the forum threads. The chat room is less often used and has less variety in structure making it overall less relevant to how structure impacts norms.

The influence of structure on the norms of the forum starts with its placement under the "Community" tab on the website, a clearly intentional association designed by the site managers. The forum itself is presented as a list of individual threads, each one with a topic of discussion. The threads appear in the order of last activity, making the order of the threads a reflection of both time of creation and relative popularity. Site managers encourage member participation by evaluating the threads based on level of commenting activity. From this it is evident that the fan community values the exchange of ideas. Topics that are initiating a high level of communication stay relevant; the site is clearly attempting to coax members into adopting active participation as a community norm.

¹³ Lee Sungwook, Park Do-Hyung, and Ingoo Han, "New Members' Online Socialization in Online Communities: The Effects of Content Quality and Feedback on New Members' Content-Sharing Intentions," (2013)

¹⁴ Nancy K. Baym, "The Emergence of On-Line Community," (SAGE 1998)

¹⁵ Nessim Watson, "Why We Argue About Virtual Community: A Case Study of the Phish.Net Fan Community," chap. 4 in *Virtual Community: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, ed. Steve Jones (Sage, 1997), p. 109-110

¹⁶ Nancy K. Baym, "The Emergence of On-Line Community," (SAGE 1998), p. 43-45

Within a thread, the original post is at the top with all subsequent comments listed below. Users can comment either on the original post or on any of the other comments listed. Often when commenting on a side comment, users will include a quote of the comment they are responding to. The effect of this is the encouragement of the creation of interpersonal relationships by allowing for direct back-and-forth communication between members, highlighting this as another structurally created norm. Examples abound of members using this function to express empathy,¹⁷ disagreement,¹⁸ solidarity,¹⁹ and many other intentions to fellow members.

A final structural feature of Phish.net's forum that influences community norms is the ability to up-vote or down-vote a comment. This anonymous form of feedback provides a mechanism for members to voicelessly respond to posts. In addition, this component is an easy means of participation that encourages 'lurkers,' site visitors that do not typically participate, to be active without committing to a virtual identity or risking negative reactions from other members. This feature is yet another that attempts to instill active site participation as a social norm. Based on the structure of the Phish.net forum threads, the site defines community participation and personal member-to-member communication as important.

More significantly than the structures of Phish.net, the actual information being exchanged on the site acts as a source of community norms. That is to say, the discussions members are having are the most significant source for the adoption of certain values and behavioral patterns as acceptable. After analysis of the many forum threads, going back as far as 2009, the norms and values expressed on this site can be broken into basic categories. The most prevalent basic categories defining Phish fans' behavioral and ideological norms are freedom, ethical consumption, and most significantly, authenticity. These groupings are loose associations between threads with an innumerable range of topics; they represent the most basic

commonalities between those topics that were a significant presence on the forum.

The first category of norm established on Phish.net, freedom, covers a wide range of behaviors and discussion topics exhibited on the site. A thread entitled "Police Brutality in Rochester" displays this value clearly as members engage in discussion on the role of police. The consensus is that police have too much power over a scared public and that there has been a slow erosion of our freedoms following 9/11.²⁰ This desire for political and social freedom also translates into free drug use among members. "Your Stance on Marijuana Legalization"²¹ and "Lysergic Acid Diethylamide"²² are two examples of threads that call for widespread decriminalization of drug use, demonstrating further the prevalence of freedom as a norm on Phish.net. Another aspect to the social and political freedom valued by members is tolerance. Watson touches upon this briefly as he describes the markers of community belonging, "On Phish.net race, gender, and sexual orientation are non-issues."²³ The thread "Any Other Gay Phans?" received tremendous support with almost a hundred upvotes, and while not many other members responded in the affirmative, it still supports Watson's conclusion on tolerance.²⁴ The general norm of freedom constructed on Phish.net is done so through a value of social and political autonomy expressed by members in a variety of ways on a variety of thread topics as shown above.

Not only do Phish fans reinforce freedom as an ideological and behavioral norm, but they also demonstrate a premium on ethical consumption. Similarly to freedom, this norm can be broken down into various forms and components. One way in which ethical consumption is conveyed as a norm is in thread posts attacking corporate and individual

²⁰ "Police Brutality in Rochester," (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

²¹ "Your Stance on Marijuana Legalization," (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

²² "Lysergic Acid Diethylamide," (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

²³ Nessim Watson, "Why We Argue About Virtual Community: A Case Study of the Phish.Net Fan Community," chap. 4 in *Virtual Community: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, ed. Steve Jones (Sage, 1997), p. 108

²⁴ "Any Other Gay Phans?," (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

¹⁷ bostonron. "10 year old dog is sick...", (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

¹⁸ Rebe_. "What's with all the hate on Alaska?," (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

¹⁹ Choda. "@bostonron is the MAN," (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

greed. "Backwards Down the McResource Line,"²⁵ and "Boycott Walmart."²⁶ are threads that obviously combat corporate greed in America, in doing so, they purport the norm of ethical consumption. A thread that speaks out about Black Friday also contains a plea to members to support Small Business Saturday.²⁷ In these ways, members' calls to fight capitalism display an underlying desire to consume ethically. Another way in which ethical consumption is lofted as a norm of this community is through how members feel about Phish's own efforts to give back. One member posted a thread, "Phish and Philanthropy," inquiring about how Phish is involved in volunteer work. Members were eager to respond, pointing out various instances of Phish donating profits to a cause.²⁸ Further investigation led to the discovery of the FAQ What causes does Phish support? The inclusion of this as an FAQ on the site is a prime example of how Phish fans want to see Phish as good for the world. There is a desire, possibly driven by the implications of following a band, to see money spent on Phish as money going towards improving the world. These thread examples demonstrate how the ideological norm of ethical consumption is perpetuated in this online social setting. In these ways, site users promote the ideological and behavioral value of ethical consumption.

There is a great deal of hypocrisy in the value of ethical consumption. Borrowing Bryant Simon's framework for analyzing the same norm as a component of the Starbucks Moment, it is clear that Phish.net users have a false sense of this norm. In *Everything but the Coffee*, Simon looks at how consumers' desire for ethical consumption played a big part in Starbucks' commercial success. He describes ultimately that the company put on a face of ethical business practices to play off of consumer interests, but ultimately did not follow through on its promise to improve the world with their profits.²⁹ This same consumer desire to view spending as

ethical is a driving force in the creation of this norm online and consequently many aspects of it are hypocritical when thinking about the nature of fanhood and looking at other community values. Yes, members on Phish.net discuss supporting the world and only spending money on small businesses and any number of other positive consumption habits, but in the end, concerts are a prime example of conspicuous consumption. In addition, as this paper previously describes, one of the major values of this community is drug use, which is inherently unethical as a mode of consumption. It is important to think about the ways in which the community norm valuing ethical consumption has many underlying hypocrisies embedded in it. These inconsistencies connect directly to Bryant Simon's work on Starbucks, showing that this norm may stem from an offline psychological tendency. Users feel a need to justify their consumption as moral, despite the glaring contradiction that exists when this attitude is applied to concerts and drug use, both of which are also major components of being a Phish fan.

In addition to instituting ethical consumption as a community norm, Phish.net also generates a premium value on authenticity in its many forms. This final category of norm is by far the most significant in its prevalence on the site and influence on member behavior. In much the same way as the other two categories, authenticity's importance on the site is demonstrated in a number of ways. Behaviorally, authenticity plays a role in the dynamics of interaction between members. Watson describes a hierarchy of fanhood centered around social cues that determine a user's status based on "Displayed knowledge, repeated presence... large lists of collected tapes... closeness to the band, extensive fan experience, and Internet experience."³⁰ The social cues Watson lists are indicators of authentic fanhood. On the site there is a notion of 'real' fanhood as something members should strive towards. The struggle by members attempting to define their world as authentic is demonstrated in the use of language on the site. By creating their own terminology, which includes song abbreviations, band member nicknames, and

²⁵ "Backwards Down the McResource Line," (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

²⁶ "boycott walmart.," (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

²⁷ "RC: is DISGUSTED by black friday," (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

²⁸ "Phish and Philanthropy," (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

²⁹ Bryant Simon, *Everything but the Coffee*, (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2009), 201-219.

³⁰ Nessim Watson, "Why We Argue About Virtual Community: A Case Study of the Phish.Net Fan Community," chap. 4 in *Virtual Community: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, ed. Steve Jones (Sage, 1997), p. 108

classifying terms such as the ‘real vs. fake’ mentality, members on Phish.net are establishing their world as exclusive. Members thus have to adopt this terminology in order to be perceived as authentic by their peers, acting in new ways to retain social status. The creation and adoption of a new set of terms points to a firm belief in authenticity as a desirable component of this community.

Authenticity as a behavioral norm is also indicated by the ways in which music is valued and discussed online. When discussing Phish on the forum, members have formed a widespread consensus that Phish’s best material emerged from their early years. Realistically, there is no way to quantify this debate, however, the four members only get better at playing as time goes on. In addition, recording technology has improved vastly, resulting in significantly better quality recordings. This would lead many to believe that modern Phish is in their prime. However, that would go against the valued authenticity that fans seek, leading to the opposite belief firmly taking root. The notion that Phish was best twenty years ago is a sign that members of Phish.net need to feel a sense of authenticity when talking about the band. Not only does music discussion encompass Phish, but it also applies to many other bands that have gravitated towards the ‘Jam Band’ genre. Bands such as Government Mule, the Grateful Dead, Dave Matthews Band, and many other smaller groups are talked about and listened to in the Phish.net forum. These bands are all talked about by users in the similar language of authenticity established for Phish, further showing how the desire to be an authentic fan effects members’ actions online.

Authenticity presents itself on Phish.net as the most influential norm based on how it impacts members’ actions, perceptions, and treatment of other members. This norm establishes itself as a way to think about other fans, as the thread “I Have a Question About Being a ‘Real Fan’”³¹ shows. The poster is expressing knowledge of the value of authenticity and concern that they do not embody that value in some way. Members are forced to comply to the standards of authenticity already present on the site if they want authority and respect

with other members. Just as with ethical consumption, Bryant Simon also approaches the concept of authenticity in his book on Starbucks. Simon finds that authenticity is a factor driving the coffee giant’s success as consumers seek an authentic coffee-buying experience. Similarly, it can be said that users on Phish.net seek an authentic forum-using experience. Starbucks and Phish.net convey authenticity through the use of their own specialized language, as well as displayed knowledge of coffee and Phish respectively. While Phish.net’s value of the authentic is comparable to patterns of authenticity Simon describes, it ultimately does not have the negative connotations of Simon’s work.³²

The norms of a community are a powerful force dictating members’ adoption of values and behaviors. Phish.net, as an online community, has many norms defined in its forum through various structural features as well as the ideas and behaviors expressed by members. Analyzing the site’s forum reveals three major categories of norms, freedom, ethical consumption, and authenticity. Each category has many characteristic components including a range of displayed behaviors by members and a wide array of subjects and perspectives being disseminated. Understanding the norms established online is essential in thinking about the effect this virtual community has on its members’ offline actions.

³¹ “I have a question about being a “real fan,” (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

³² Bryant Simon, *Everything but the Coffee*, (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2009).

Identifying the Significance of Phish.net as an Online Community

After exploring and defining the norms of Phish.net, it is time to identify what is significant about this community. The essay will now delve into how this online community affects the offline world. It will examine Phish.net as an organizational tool enabling people from geographically distant areas to coordinate action based on similar interests and values. As an online community, Phish.net has a definite, substantial impact on the actions of its members in the offline world. Phish.net as an online community is important to study because of its potential influence as a new medium of communication, a new means of representation, and a tool for organizing and coordinating social and political action.

One way in which to look at the influence of Phish.net is as a newly emerging form of communication. Previous work using this approach finds a number of effects of the Internet as a new way to interact with others. In "Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone: Virtual Community as Community" the researchers explore the impact of online on offline. They conclude that the Internet is just another form of communication, comparing it to the emergence of the telephone. They find that people use the Internet to sustain both strong and weak emotional ties with others. As relationships develop online, the virtual community becomes essential in maintaining those relationships.³³ Other research into the offline implications of the Internet as a tool for communicating includes an experiment conducted called Netville. This study took a real offline community of 109 single-family homes and analyzed how both local and long-distance community was established and maintained through the Internet by comparing 'wired' and 'non-wired' residents. The results of the study suggest that online community not only helps in maintaining long-distance contact with friends and family, but also actually helped foster a sense of community in the offline neighborhood. Residents who used the Internet had greater levels of informal interactions with other residents and were found to know more names of their neighbors than residents not using the web. The Netville experiment provides

substantive proof that using the Internet as a means of communication actually has positive effects on an offline sense of community.³⁴ Proof of this offline sense of community being strengthened on Phish.net is in threads like "Let's Help Reading PA"³⁵ which urges concertgoers to support local business in the Reading community. There are also innumerable threads urging .netters to meet up at concerts, showing that the site acts as a way to coordinate offline action. By applying the results of these two studies to Phish.net, it becomes clear the site is significant as a means of communication, maintaining personal ties on the Internet.

In addition to looking at Phish.net as a new means of communication, it can also be seen as an emerging means of representation. Phish.net has a significant impact as a way for people to display or represent themselves to a larger audience. This can take the form of consumer feedback, which Nessim Watson explores in his work. Phish.net, Watson finds, is a perfect outlet to air consumer grievances. He details how the site changed the music industry, forcing the inclusion of "Jam-band" as a genre as well as impacting the success of groups like Dave Matthews Band.³⁶ "...Being a part of a community is necessary to gaining representation. A group must be recognized from above as carrying enough importance to have its demands assessed and sated."³⁷ As Watson concludes, Phish.net is a perfect means to bring together members with a common interest for common representation. Without the web, these geographically dispersed people would never be in the same representative group. "Fast Food Protests" is a thread that exhibits how Phish.net acts as a tool for representing consumer preferences by serving as an example of members participating in a process of consumer feedback.

³⁴ Barry Wellman, Jeffrey Boase, and Wenhong Chen, "The Networked Nature of Community: Online and Offline," *IT & Society*, 1, no. 1 (2002)

³⁵ "Let's help Reading PA," (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

³⁶ Nessim Watson, "Why We Argue About Virtual Community: A Case Study of the Phish.Net Fan Community," chap. 4 in *Virtual Community: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, ed. Steve Jones (Sage, 1997), p. 126

³⁷ Nessim Watson, "Why We Argue About Virtual Community: A Case Study of the Phish.Net Fan Community," chap. 4 in *Virtual Community: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, ed. Steve Jones (Sage, 1997), p. 126

³³ Wellman, Barry, and Milena Gulia, "Net Surfers Don't ride Alone: Virtual Communities as Communities," (1997)

Not only can Phish.net be seen as a means of representation, but it can also be viewed as an organizational tool for coordinating political and social participation among its members. This is perhaps the most significant aspect of Phish.net's offline influence. The idea that online communities are being used to generate political and social action, often in the form of protest, is introduced in "Movement Societies and Digital Protest." This article details how online protests have emerged on a whole range of topics, from fan protests to serious petitions. The study attributes the rise of Internet use in protests to its ability to bring people together, regardless of spatial concerns, in a cheap, low consequence way, enabling discussion and coordinated action.³⁸ The study's finds on the Internet influencing the ways political and social action take place apply strongly to Phish.net, seen in the site's forum threads. The threads "Ghost Petition to Whitehouse"³⁹ and "Petition to Protect State's MJ Laws,"⁴⁰ which received widespread support from the community, are direct examples of how Phish.net acts as a tool for organizing political action. Members' rely on common interests and values to get support for various causes and to instigate action from other members. This characteristic of Phish.net is also exemplified through a focus on international aid. Threads call for action from users to help the victims of the Haiti Earthquake, Japan's tsunami, and Joseph Kony in Uganda. These three instances of Phish.net involving its members in international issues demonstrate the site's potential as a rallying place for social action. The political protest threads, along with those calling for social participation, speak to the validity of "Movement Societies and Digital Protest" and its conclusion that online community can act as a tool for organizing social and political action.

Conclusion

The emergence of online communities has many worried over the impact they will have on our

sense of community offline. There is a concern that the Internet is replacing face-to-face relationships with something that is somehow inferior. The thought is that online community cannot capture the nuances of support and sociability present in 'real' communities. The analysis of Phish.net reveals that this is not actually the case. Evidence on the offline consequences of virtual communities suggests that interactions online translate to a strengthened sense of community offline. Phish.net supports this notion by being a place where members engage in conversation on innumerable topics. While much of the topics are not exceedingly relevant, there are many examples of discussion threads that exhibit social concern and support and encourage members to take action. As the world gets more and more globalized, sites like this will become important centers for information sharing and the organization of social and political action. Users of Phish.net are aware of the community they have created and often appeal to that community's values to garner widespread, international support. Studying sites like this one becomes important in understanding how the Internet serves to connect geographically distant people and instigate their active participation in a variety of social and political contexts.

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³⁸ Jennifer Earl, and Katrina Kimport, "Movement Societies and Digital Protest: Fan Activism and Other Nonpolitical Protest Online," (2009)

³⁹ "ghost petition to Whitehouse," (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

⁴⁰ "Petition to protect State's MJ Laws," (online forum message). *Phish.net*. <http://forum.phish.net/>

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