

# Engaging the Disengaged: Collective Action, Media Uses, and Sense of (Virtual) Community by Evacuees From Gush Katif

American Behavioral Scientist  
53(8) 1208–1227

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DOI: 10.1177/0002764209356251  
<http://abs.sagepub.com>



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## Abstract

Former residents of the evacuated Gush Katif region, once parts of closely knit and cohesive communities, have been spread across Israel in temporary settlements since the disengagement, in 2005. The goal of this study was to learn how the evacuees interacted with one another online to organize politically and retain their social capital. The study focused on Katif.net, the major Internet site in use by the former residents of Gush Katif. This is an unusual case of a virtual community that continues to thrive online even as its offline predecessor has been evacuated.

## Keywords

online communities, virtual communities, computer-mediated communication, Internet, sense of community, uses and gratifications

Gush Katif was a string of 21 Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip, most of them situated around the Palestinian town of Khan-Yunis in the southern part of the strip. The settlements were established between 1970 and 2005. At that latter time, the Gush (as the block of settlements was called) had approximately 8,500 residents. The center of the Gush was Neve Dekalim, inhabited by some 700 families (about a third the total population of the Gush). All the settlements were a part of the Gaza Coast (Chof Aza) regional council.

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The population of Gush Katif subsisted mainly on services, small industry, and agriculture (about 900 acres of greenhouses). The communities of the Gush were quite homogeneous, socially and religiously: The majority were members of the Zionist national religious camp, held together by strong social bonds and a thick sense of community and reinforced by the harsh and exacerbated security concerns (Billig, 2006; Schnell & Mishal, 2005). This was especially felt after the start of the second Palestinian uprising, the Al-Aqsa Intifada, in 2000. After 2000, the settlements found themselves under frequent attack from the neighboring Palestinians, and during this period the settlements suffered approximately 6,000 mortar and Qassam rocket attacks, as well as frequent small arms fire directed at both the settlements and the main access roads leading to them (Weisblat, Tal & Lotan, 2007). On a few occasions, militants succeeded in evading the thick defensive presence of the Israel Defense Forces around the settlements and infiltrating inside, leading to casualties among soldiers, inhabitants, and foreign workers.

Residents' geographic isolation from family and friends living outside the settlements enhanced the need to rely on friends from within the community, and life in the settlements became engaged in common challenges and mutual assistance. With the deterioration of the security situation, the sense of togetherness grew stronger, as did the community spirit, which led to traditions such as shared meals when residents survived a dangerous attack (Billig, 2006; Roth, 2005).

## Disengagement

The disengagement plan was initiated by Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon and revealed to the public for the first time in December 2003. It called for a unilateral withdrawal of Israel from the Gaza Strip, evacuating all military forces as well as all civilian settlements. Four settlements in northern Samaria were to be evacuated as well (Kadim, Ganim, Sa-Nur, and Chomesh). In this article, I discuss only the evacuation of Gush Katif.

On October 26, 2004, the Israeli Knesset approved the initial framework for the legal procedure of evacuating the settlements, with a majority vote of 67 to 45. On February 16, 2005, the disengagement plan was codified into law with a majority vote of 59 to 40. The actual implementation of the disengagement lasted less than a month, between August 15 and September 11, 2005. In comparison, the earlier disengagement of Israel, from the Sinai peninsula (now in Egypt), lasted 3 years (from the late 1970s to the early 1980s), including both the decision-making process and the evacuation of citizens from the peninsula. Thus, the disengagement from Gush Katif involved a significantly shorter time for the state authorities to get prepared, as well as less time for the settlers and their supporters to organize, prepare, offer alternatives, and protest (Kliot, 2005; Roth, 2005; Sheleg, 2007).

In terms of the communities in the Gush, handling the challenges of the evacuation proved difficult. The people of Gush Katif long held themselves as the true vanguard of Zionism and the state of Israel—the first to face the enemy on its borders and the ones willing to make personal sacrifices to live in such a hotly contested yet historically significant part of the land. After the approval of the disengagement plan, the residents were

asked to leave a community that they had spent decades building under duress of continued hostility and attacks; in addition, support for them sank in the eyes of in the Israeli public, leaving many feeling betrayed and humiliated (Billig, 2005, 2006; Roth, 2005).

The Israeli government's approval of the disengagement plan led to a heated public debate that included numerous acts of protest on behalf of the residents of Gush Katif, who to this day refer to the disengagement as an "uprooting" or "expulsion." Among the salient acts of protest against the disengagement, one can find the following (Roth, 2005).

*The color orange.* Orange quickly became known as the symbol of the antidisengagement movement. Orange banners and signs were to be found almost everywhere in the country—in residential and commercial areas, intersections, highways, and major landmarks and on cars, backpacks, and wrists. Orange was a sign of unity and solidarity with the settlers of Gush Katif. In the many protest events, the organizers and participants wore orange shirts or skirts.

*Demonstrations.* The largest demonstration against the disengagement took place in Rabin Square on the August 11, 2005, comprising upward of 250,000 demonstrators demanding a halt to the immanent evacuation. Another large demonstration took place a month before the disengagement, in July 2005 in Kfar Maimon, where thousands of people made their way to the Kisufim checkpoint, the entranceway to Gush Katif. Upon arrival, they were blocked by the security forces, and a demonstration ensued. In October 14, 2004, the settlers and their supporters orchestrated the Mifgan Ha-Mea (100 Demonstrations), involving 100 orchestrated demonstrations across Israel.

*Panim el Panim (Face to Face).* Panim el Panim was a statewide initiative that aimed to familiarize the citizens of Israel with the settlers of Gush Katif and their supporters—that is, face-to-face. Volunteers from all over the country went door-to-door to explain their point of view.

*The Israeli Chain.* A protest held on the July 25, 2004, the Israeli Chain was an unprecedented logistical effort that resulted in a stretch of volunteers holding hands from the Western Wall in Jerusalem all the way until the northern part of the Gaza strip. This human chain extended 90 kilometers (56 miles) and comprised 130,000 participants.

*The Internet.* The struggle expanded to the Israeli Internet, with many sites protesting the disengagement. Among the most salient were the Web site of Moetzet Yesha (the council of Judea, Samaria, and Gaza region), the Channel 7 radio station Web site, and Katif.net (on which I elaborate later). Activities ranged from traditional advertising to creating chains of interlinked sites opposing the disengagement—sites such as <http://www.shame.co.il> (which posted blacklists of pivotal persons identified with the disengagement) and <http://www.seruv.co.il> (which offered everything from moral support to practical guidance to those members of the security forces who considered refusing to participate in the evacuation).

## The Situation Today

At the time of the disengagement, the Israeli government established an organization called Minhelet Sela (Assistance for Settlers of Gaza and Northern Samaria), whose mandate was to assist the settlers the "day after" in various capacities—new housing

(temporary and permanent), financial compensation, employment guidance, psychological assistance, and so on.

The organization that represents the settlers of Gush Katif is known as Vaad Mityashvey Gush Katif (Committee for the Settlers of Gush Katif; <http://www.4katif.org.il>), which was established before the disengagement. Today it continues to assist the evacuees, and its goals involve assisting in the interface between the communities and the state authorities, promoting issues of general interest to the evacuees (e.g., finding permanent settlements, employment), and documenting and preserving the history of the Gush (<http://www.4katif.org.il/new/about.asp>). The committee works with local community coordinators in each community where evacuees can be found.

Before the disengagement, Minhelet Sela found itself struggling with many of the settlers who refused to cooperate with the effort to organize their move. As a result, housing solutions for many of the evacuees were not properly prepared (in most cases, the location of future permanent housing was never even agreed on). According to the Clause 85 of the official disengagement implementation law, Minhelet Sela can establish contracts with groups of settlers to allow them to relocate as an entire community. The idea behind relocating entire communities was to ease the process of rearrangement by preserving the communal infrastructure already established in the Gush. This option was by far the preferred choice of the evacuees, and 85% took advantage of it (Israel Comptroller Office, 2009; Vaad Mityashvey Gush Katif, 2008).

Immediately after the disengagement, many evacuees found themselves in motels, hotels, and other temporary living arrangements. Some opted to live in hastily constructed tent cities to preserve the community bond. Over time, Minhelet Sela assisted in focusing and regrouping these disparate clusters into a smaller and more communal living clusters, although still classified as temporary living. As of August 2008, 3 full years after the disengagement was carried out, most of the evacuees were still concentrated in a number of temporary communities. Of the 85% who chose to relocate as a community, only a small percentage, about 5%, moved to their permanent housing (Israel Comptroller Office, 2009; Vaad Mityashvey Gush Katif, 2008).

The majority of settlers from Gush Katif reside today within the area in southern Israel known as Outer Gaza, just 30 kilometers (18 miles) northeast of their former homes. The three biggest clusters of evacuees today are found in Nitzan (approximately 500 families), Yad Binyamin (approximately 250 families), and Ein Tzurim (around 150 families).<sup>1</sup>

In various reports, the Israeli state comptroller has severely criticized Minhelet Sela. A recent report (Israel Comptroller Office, 2009) pointed to a large number of bureaucratic failings on the part of Minhelet Sela, including deferment of money transfers, mismanagement of claims, inefficient decision-making processes, bureaucratic red tape, and more. In July 2008, the Israeli parliament established an investigating commission to study the failings in the process of relocating the evacuees. At this time, about 20% of the evacuees were still unemployed, and less than half the business owners were able to reestablish their businesses after relocation. Only a third of the active farmers from the Gush resumed working in agriculture (Vaad Mityashvey Gush

Katif, 2008; Weisblai Tal & Lotan, 2007). Research reports about former Gush residents have revealed various psychological disorders, particularly among the younger evacuees, such as anxiety attacks, depression, nightmares, and posttraumatic stress (Oren, 2008; Oren & Possik, 2009; Weisblai Tal & Lotan, 2007).

## Katif.net

In the 3 years since the disengagement, the majority of the evacuees were still far from finding permanent relocation. As such, evacuees needed to organize in ways that promoted solutions to their discomfort and preserved the social connection with friends and relatives who relocated to other areas in the country. The evacuees stayed in touch and organized through various means of communication:

*meetings and conferences*—notably, events organized by Vaad Mityashvey Gush Katif, such as the annual ceremony commemorating “the destruction” of the Gush; *Shabbat synagogue pamphlets*—introducing religious and social commentary, distributed every Friday in synagogues across the country (e.g., *Olam Katan*, *Maayanay Hayeshua*, and *B’Ahava U-B’Emunah*; these “small media” are significant for communication among the religious communities of Israel; Almozlinos, 2006);

*print media*—newspapers distributed on a daily or weekly basis (among those that are popular with the evacuees are the right-wing-leaning *B’sheva*, *Hatzofe*, and *Makor Rishon*);

*radio*—either over the air or via the Internet (especially Arutz Sheva [Channel 7], <http://www.inn.co.il>);

*cell phones and short message service*—before the disengagement, Orange, a leading Israeli cellular company established a unique plan called Orange Gush, which offered an attractive fair for calls among the 7,000 subscribers living in the Gush<sup>2</sup> (Orange continues to offer this service today, after the disengagement);

*Katif.net*—the Web site currently most identified with the Gush (details later); *other Web sites associated with Gush Katif*—such as the site of Vaad Mityashvey Gush Katif (<http://www.4katif.org.il>) and sites of local communities (e.g., the evacuees from Neve Dkalim who reside in Nitzan; [ndn.org.il](http://ndn.org.il));

*general-interest Web sites*—such as [ynet.co.il](http://ynet.co.il) or [walla.co.il](http://walla.co.il), two of Israel’s largest Web portals;

*mailing lists*—created by community coordinators or private individuals; and of course

*television broadcasts*.

Quite a few studies have examined the coverage of the disengagement by the media (i.e., Keshev Center, 2006; Roth, 2005; Sela, 2006; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2008) as well as the media’s influence (Tsftati & Cohen, 2005; cf. Sheaffer, 2005).

Almozlinos (2006) conducted a study on the uses of small media (synagogue pamphlets) before the disengagement.

The current study is unique in its focus on (a) media use by the evacuees after the disengagement and (b) bottom-up communication over the Internet—namely, some evacuees' use of virtual communities to compensate for the loss of their physical communities. Virtual communities bring together people with common interests and enable continuing communication over the Internet (Haythornthwaite, 2002; Matzat & De-Vos, 2000; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). In this study, I look at the unique case of the Katif.net community, where an offline, on-the-ground, brick-and-mortar community composed of the residents of Gush Katif disintegrated in the physical sense yet continued to survive in a virtual setting on the Internet.

Of all the aforementioned media that can be used to maintain contact by members of disintegrated communities, the Internet is unique for its interactivity, ease of access and usage, and global reach. Israel has an extremely high penetration of broadband Internet access per capita, and the Hebrew-language Internet is well developed,<sup>3</sup> which makes the use of the Internet for such purposes even more appealing.

Whereas many Web sites identify with Gush Katif and the struggle against the disengagement, Katif.net was clearly the leading communication and organizational hub for residents of the Gush and their supporters before and right after the disengagement (Roth, 2005). Katif.net is a private Web site managed by the Sender family, primarily Motti Sender, a former resident of the Gush who lived in Ganey Tal before the disengagement and today lives in Yad Binyamin. Sender is the owner of the site, and with the assistance of his son Elchanan, he hosts and manages Katif.net as a nonprofit project with no commercial or institutional support. Before the disengagement, Sender was a farmer and a photographer. According to Sender,<sup>4</sup> the site was first established as a public relations tool to document the daily life in the Gush and to bolster sales of the local produce of the Gush. Almost from the outset, the site included discussion forums, weekly Torah commentaries, and event listings, which made it a popular destination for the Gush residents.

As the site's popularity grew, Sender found himself struggling to keep up with the rapidly mounting user base and even offered to transfer control of the site to the regional council, to make it the official Web site for the region. But there was no interest at the time on behalf of the council. Three years later, the regional council created its own Web site, but it was overshadowed by Katif.net's strong and vibrant user base.

When news of the disengagement plan first broke, Katif.net rapidly began functioning as the main organizational hub for residents and outside supporters to protest the government's plan for evacuation (Roth, 2005). The site quickly branded itself as the leader of the antidisengagement movement, creating a virtual space for activists to discuss strategies and tactics of resistance. By virtue of the site's popularity and because of its clever use of interactivity and rich graphics, it aided in recruiting volunteers and protestors, and it provided diligent documentation (with photos and video) of the various protests. What follows is a short summary of protest activities as orchestrated through the site.

## *Protest Headquarters*

Katif.net established numerous minisites focused on the antidisengagement movement. First and foremost was Protest Headquarters (Mate Hamaavak, <http://www.katif.net/mate/>), a minisite that served as a grassroots hub, of the council of Judea, Samaria, and Gaza region, for all the various protests and demonstrations. At this site (with the logo and address of Katif.net on top), one could find promotional materials, reports from the field, commentary, and motivational essays dedicated to the struggle against the disengagement.

## *The Israeli Chain*

Taking advantage of its special status as the online organizational hub for the antidisengagement movement, Katif.net took a major part in organizing the ambitious protest of the Israeli Chain, which was described above. (<http://www.katif.net/chain>). As described by Sender, “the human chain was meant to demonstrate strength, perseverance, and national unity.” The site helped individuals select spots for themselves along the chain’s route. The collaborative effort included 130,000 volunteers, many of whom chose their location along the chain using the interface found in the site.

The chain took place on July 25, 2004, a year before the disengagement was to begin and 2 days before the Ninth of Av festival—a Jewish day of mourning for the destruction of the second temple in 70 AD. The human chain minisite opened by Katif.net, as shown in Figure 1, cleverly organized the flow and position of volunteers along the length of the chain to ensure that it had no missing links along its 90-kilometer (56-mile) route. The chain marked the height of Katif.net’s popularity, and during the day 1 million visitors (!) accessed the site, resulting in the crash of the server that hosted it.<sup>5</sup>

## *The 100 Demonstrations*

Another popular minisite on Katif.net was the 100 Demonstrations site. In 100 cities and towns across the country, Katif.net assisted in recruiting local coordinators and youth leaders to plan demonstrations and protests, culminating in a simultaneous 100-city demonstration on October 14, 2004. The goals of this demonstration were to establish local headquarters in support of the struggle against the disengagement (<http://www.katif.net/new.php?id=5970>) and reshape public opinion toward better understanding the nature of the struggle for the Gush—not only as a private struggle by the individuals who lived there but by people nationwide for the future of the country. The organizers of Katif.net covered the demonstrations in 12 cities and uploaded video and photos to the site (<http://video.katif.net/>).

## *Plant-a-Tree*

In January 2005, the site added another section, Plant-a-Tree in Gush Katif (<http://www.katif.net/2b>). Visitors to the site could make donations to have trees or flowers



Figure 1. The Israeli Chain Katif.net guided users to the ideal spot for them to stand

planted in their names on the grounds of the Gush. Donations were accompanied by certificates lauding the visitors' commitment to the Gush and its continued settlement. The site held a second tree-planting fund-raiser, after the disengagement, where in this case the trees were strictly virtual (<http://www.katif.net/~new/tmp/2b/planting-he.php>) and the goal was to raise donations to support the ongoing functioning of the site.

Another fund-raising initiative was the Trimmed Menorah (Hahanukiah Haktumah, in Hebrew)—a play on the Hebrew words for orange (*katom*) and amputated or trimmed (*katum*). After the disengagement, around the festival of Chanukah in December 2005, the site opened a new project that introduced a virtual menorah (<https://www.katif.net/pirsom/chanoka/index.htm>), asking visitors to make donations and fill in the menorah with orange cubes (see Figure 2). These donations were put toward the continued operation of Katif.net following the disengagement.

### Petitions

Over the course of 5 years, Palestinians fired close to 6,000 mortar shells at the various settlements in the Gush. To bring exposure to these attacks, a mortar counter was placed on the site, which kept track of each new mortar attack and sent messages to the site's members and visitors. In addition, 17,000 signatures were collected for a petition calling on the prime minister and defense minister to take action against the attacks (<http://www.katif.net/patzmar/bpatzmar.php>). Another petition was called "Expulsion, No!—Settlement, Yes!" calling on then-prime minister Ariel Sharon to stop his plans for the disengagement and instead foster growth and further settlement in Gush Katif (<http://www.katif.net/altakor/>).



**Figure 2.** The Trimmed Menorah

### The Site After the Disengagement

Sender and his family were not sure of what they should do with the site after the disengagement. As demonstrated, the site served as a rallying point and organizational hub with a finite goal: canceling the disengagement. Once it was actually carried out, the site's primary content—news flashes, protest information, petitions, and antidisengagement commentary—became somewhat irrelevant. In the end, Motti Sender posted a message on the front page of the site:

More than 5 years ago, we started the Ketif.net picture album of the Gush, which evolved into the official Web site for Gush Katif—which was at the disposal of the residents of the Gush right and all the “orange” supporters in Israel and worldwide, up until the expulsion. After the expulsion, we made a strategic decision to continue and operate the site for our brothers, the residents of Gish Katif, and for all the hundreds of thousands of our supporters on each site. Today, December 15, 2005, we are happy to air together the new Katif.net site.

The uniqueness of the new site is the opening of 1,800 personal family sites for each family from the uprooted Gush who can, starting today, post directly to the site news, updates, personal stories, blogs, and pictures from the past, present, and, God willing, the future while building our new homes and returning to Gush Katif. All of these personal sites are now connected to the main page of Katif.net.<sup>6</sup>

As the reality of the disengagement and facts on the ground changed, so too did Katif.net. The original Katif.net (<http://www.katif.net/?old=1>) dealt primarily with the struggle against the disengagement—as a tool to organize and lead the nationwide protests. Once the battle over the disengagement was over, the site morphed into a memorial to both the struggle and the settlements and homes that made up the Gush. In addition, the site started offering critical services to the former residents as well as helping the dispersed evacuees of the Gush maintain contact. The site served an important role in the days immediately following the disengagement, when all the dispersed families needed information and advice from neighbors and friends.

To facilitate this communication, each family from the 1,800 that lived in the Gush was given a personal minisite within the platform of Katif.net. Also included in the package was a Katif.net e-mail account and an online picture album where the family could post pictures of their former homes in the Gush. At the time of writing, however, only 165 family pages were active on the site and took advantage of these options.<sup>7</sup>

## Method

Katif.net demonstrates a unique phenomenon where a community that once thrived in the physical realm migrates into the virtual realm.<sup>8</sup> The regrouping of community members online is an intriguing case study for three reasons. First and primarily, the inhabitants of Gush Katif did not choose to remove their community from the physical realm; they were forced to evacuate by legal mandate of the disengagement. Second, the settlers of the Gush spent many years building and developing the physical community. It was not merely an experience or phase in their lives, like serving in the army, but rather the entirety of their lives in their homes with their families. Furthermore, the years leading up to the disengagement bonded these families even more through the crucible of their shared hardships and struggle against their impending evacuation. A third point is the homogeneous ideological and religious background throughout the Gush, which created a strong sense of community within the Gush and with like-minded supporters throughout the country. Thus, it is interesting to see to what extent the Internet can preserve the strong communal bonds that existed “on the ground.”

Given the nature of the disengagement, with its poor management of the evacuees (as described in depth in the comptroller’s report; Israel Comptroller Office, 2009), the communication media used by the evacuees have had two significant roles: maintaining social cohesion in spite of dispersion and separation, and pressuring the various authorities to take further action in their cause. The present study looks at how Katif.

**Table 1.** Frequency of Visits to the Site

	<i>n</i>	%
Everyday	53	34.9
Two to three times a week	33	21.7
Once a week	21	13.8
Once every 2 weeks	15	9.9
Less than once every 2 weeks	30	19.7
Total	152	100.0

net fulfills these roles. First, it asks, “Who uses the site and for which purposes?” and “How does it compare to other media outlets?” Second, it inquires into the sense of virtual community and its determinants and the correlation between sense of virtual community and the various media uses.

To study these questions, I used an Internet-based survey run on the popular engine Survey Monkey. The respondents got to the survey by clicking on a banner placed prominently on the Katif.net home page, with cooperation from the Sender family. The banner was on the site for 5 weeks, starting 4 weeks before the third anniversary of the disengagement and continuing for 1 week after. In addition, Sender sent a mailing with a link to the survey to all registered users on the site. In sum, 152 people filled out the survey.

## Results

According to data supplied by Sender, during 2007 Katif.net had roughly 100,000 hits per day; the most popular month was July (the anniversary of the disengagement), with around 150,000 hits. As Table 1 shows, more than half the visitors reported visiting it two or three times a week, even daily. Survey responders reported spending an average of 15 minutes at the site.

I wanted to learn what role the site fulfills in the lives of respondents. As mentioned above, the evacuees have a number of unresolved issues—namely, permanent housing, employment, compensation, the need to keep in touch socially, and more. I asked about five such issues: getting social updates, political updates, reading blogs or opinion pieces, writing blogs or opinion pieces, and reading e-mail.

Tables 2 and 3 show that getting social and political updates are significant goals of the visitors to Katif.net. Reading blogs and, even more so, writing blogs and checking e-mail were less popular. Notably, on a scale of 1 (*not used at all for social updates*) to 5 (*used extensively for social updates*), the average score of the site across the five categories was 3.78 (Table 3).

After looking at what people do when on Katif.net, I analyzed how it compares to other media they use. As Table 4 demonstrates, Katif.net proves to be pivotal across all categories when compared to other media, most notably for maintaining contact

**Table 2.** Katif.net Uses by Functional Categories

	Social Updates		Political Updates		Reading Blogs		Writing Blogs		Checking E-Mail	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Not used at all	17	11.7	25	18.1	44	33.6	88	72.7	85	74.6
Rarely used	12	8.3	28	20.3	24	18.3	14	11.6	6	5.3
Sometimes used	18	12.4	38	27.5	28	21.4	14	11.6	12	10.5
Often used	37	25.5	34	24.6	16	12.2	3	2.5	2	1.8
Extensively used	61	42.1	13	9.4	19	14.5	2	1.7	9	7.9
Total	145	100.0	138	100.0	131	100.0	121	100.0	114	100.0

**Table 3.** Katif.net Uses: Category Averages

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Social updates	145	3.78	1.38
Political updates	138	2.87	1.24
Blog reading	131	2.56	1.43
Blog writing	121	1.49	0.91
Checking e-mail	114	1.63	1.23

1 = not used at all for this purpose, 5 = used extensively for this purpose

(scoring 3.92 out of 5.00), more so than short message service (3.29) and meetings (3.23), as well as getting relevant news updates (4.37), followed—interestingly—by synagogue pamphlets (3.45). The site is also important for creating content (3.42), again followed by synagogue pamphlets (2.46).

The site is also more important than other media sources (although less pivotal) for the other two functions asked about: getting employment information (2.61), where it was followed by other Web sites associated with the Gush (2.28); and expressing political support or protest (3.02), where it was followed by meetings and conferences (2.64). Note the dominance on this list of small media, such as niche Web sites and synagogue pamphlets, above and beyond the traditional media outlets.

Next I inquired about the site visitors' sense of virtual community (note that here I refer to all members of the Katif.net online community, not just those who were evacuated from the Gush). I wanted to gauge the participants' sense of virtual community based on a scale developed by Blanchard (2007, 2008), which is composed of 18 questions measuring the degree to which a person feels embedded in his or her community. The scale is a modified version of the classic scale of McMillan and Chavis (1986), which is frequently used to measure the sense of (offline) communities. The sense of virtual community that I measured in the survey yielded a mean of 5.30 out of 7.00—close to 5.22, which Blanchard (2008)

**Table 4.** Katif.net Compared to Other Media

	Political Support / Protest						Creating Content						Employment Info						Relevant Political Info						Social Updates					
	M		SD		n		M		SD		n		M		SD		n		M		SD		n		M		SD		n	
Meetings and conferences	2.64	1.61	86	2.35	1.49	80	1.69	1.15	84	3.02	1.55	96	3.23	1.27	101															
Shabbat pamphlets	2.12	1.47	84	2.46	1.63	79	1.95	1.31	82	3.45	1.46	97	3.19	1.56	100															
Print media	1.72	1.22	83	1.78	1.24	80	2.03	1.40	80	2.78	1.45	95	2.38	1.33	100															
Radio	1.60	1.14	82	1.42	0.91	77	1.28	0.64	81	2.26	1.36	96	1.72	1.06	99															
Cell phones / short message service	1.80	1.28	82	2.01	1.43	78	1.51	1.01	80	2.57	1.48	94	3.29	1.53	92															
Television	1.53	1.04	80	1.46	1.00	79	1.32	0.75	82	2.18	1.40	98	1.74	1.22	97															
Katif.net	3.02	1.70	85	3.42	1.68	83	2.61	1.58	88	4.37	0.92	97	3.92	1.24	96															
Sites related to Gush Katif	2.35	1.64	82	2.31	1.61	77	2.28	1.60	82	2.80	1.57	92	2.66	1.53	94															
General purpose Web sites	2.57	1.63	81	1.81	1.33	79	1.63	1.13	79	2.58	1.50	93	2.13	1.34	92															
Mailing lists	1.88	1.31	77	2.36	1.56	78	1.87	1.36	77	2.69	1.60	94	2.89	1.54	93															

**Table 5.** Determinants of Sense of Virtual Community

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	p
	B	SE	$\beta$		
(Constant)	83.134	25.643		3.242	.002
Gender	-.457	.369	-.139	-1.239	.220
Income	-.296	.146	-.234	-2.034	.046
Religiosity	.752	.473	.175	1.590	.116
Years of study	.024	.048	.056	0.496	.622
Year of birth	-.041	.013	-.350	-3.104	.003

measured with 277 members of 11 bulletin boards from Babycenter.com (composed primarily of women), but higher than 3.19, which she measured in a group of 216 members of five online groups nonrandomly picked from e-mail lists and newsgroups.

But which demographic variables have an impact over Katif.net members' sense of virtual community? As shown in Table 5, Katif.net members' sense of virtual community is significantly and negatively correlated with year of birth and income. Thus, the older, less affluent members of the Katif.net community tend to report a higher sense of community than do the younger, more affluent members. Note that year of birth was coded as a four-digit number (e.g., 1970, not 70). As such, for each 10 years of age, the sense of virtual community is 0.4 higher.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, I examined how the sense of virtual community correlates with media usage and how members' uses of various media correlate. The results show significant correlations between most variables—12 of 15 correlations are significant, although the strength of correlation varies (see Table 6). Most notably, the sense of virtual community strongly correlates with usage of the site for social updates; so, the more one uses the site for social updates, the stronger one feels embedded in the virtual community. In fact, receiving social updates from Katif.net (as well as reading blogs and opinion pieces) is positively and significantly correlated with all other uses of the site—that is, the more one uses the site for social updates, the more one uses the site for all other purposes.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The idea of connecting people through virtual communities has begun to percolate into the conscience of the public and private discourse and to the practices of social movements, parties, even governments.

In the 17th and 18th centuries—in parallel with the economic, social, and technological transformations of daily experiences—the use of the word *community* in

**Table 6.** Correlations among Media Usage and Sense of Virtual Community

		1	2	3	4	5	6
Sense of virtual community	<i>r</i>		.451**	.209*	.275**	.090	.129
	<i>p</i>		.000	.032	.005	.399	.235
	<i>n</i>	116	112	105	101	91	87
Social updates	<i>r</i>	.451**		.293**	.249**	.216*	.257**
	<i>p</i>	.000		.001	.004	.017	.006
	<i>n</i>	112	145	137	130	121	114
Political updates	<i>r</i>	.209*	.293**		.408**	.199*	.105
	<i>p</i>	.032	.001		.000	.029	.268
	<i>n</i>	105	137	138	128	121	114
Reading blogs / opinion pieces	<i>r</i>	.275**	.249**	.408**		.389**	.266**
	<i>p</i>	.005	.004	.000		.000	.004
	<i>n</i>	101	130	128	131	119	113
Writing blogs / opinion pieces	<i>r</i>	.090	.216*	.199*	.389**		.296**
	<i>p</i>	.399	.017	.029	.000		.002
	<i>n</i>	91	121	121	119	121	109
Reading e-mail	<i>r</i>	.129	.257**	.105	.266**	.296**	
	<i>p</i>	.235	.006	.268	.004	.002	
	<i>n</i>	87	114	114	113	109	114

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . Two-tailed.

English expanded to include “the idea of a group of people who hold something in common . . . or who share a common sense of identity even if they do not live in a single locale” (Cole, 2002, p. xxiii). The common physical meeting place has gradually become an unnecessary condition for a group to be considered a community; nowadays, communities are “based on what we do with others, rather than where we live with others” (Haythornthwaite, 2002, p. 159).

The application of the label *community* to Internet-assisted associations has been popularized by Rheingold’s influential book (2000) about the WELL community in the San Francisco Bay Area (cf. Smith, 1992). Such an application explicitly undermines one of the deep-rooted dimensions of communities—namely, geographical proximity among members. Virtual communities complete the separation of communities from physical spaces and enable a “fundamental liberation from place” (Wellman, 2001, p. 238).

For many Internet users, such associations are important sources of goods, information, support, and sense of belonging (Wellman, 2001). Others deem virtual communities as motors of reciprocity, collaboration, and civic renewal (see Connolly, 2001, and the references therein). Such communities can also serve as a jump-start to direct members to relevant collective efforts—owing to their abilities to draw a large number of people and function as meeting places for self-selected, like-minded people (Lev-On, 2009b). Because of their scale and the self-selection of members, virtual associations can turn into focal sites that attract many potential contributors to collective action, as evident in collective actions such as citizen-based campaigns to reevaluate and

reconsider public policies, as well as orchestrated demonstrations and rallies (Lev-On, 2009b).

Typically, such collective efforts are of interest to large numbers of people, but at the absence of organizational infrastructure, such causes may not attract and mobilize enough support (Olson, 1965). Such collective efforts require the existence of easily accessed focal points to which organizers, activists, and sympathizers can converge to coordinate their efforts. Let us refer to such focal points as *organizational hubs*.

Katif.net has been of utmost importance in relation to the protests against the disengagement, functioning as such an organizational hub for protesters and supporters. It offered efficient management of a large group of like-minded individuals who were fighting for a cause. This study shows that it has been an essential means of communication after the disengagement as well—to bind evacuees together and to allow them easy access to potentially assistive information.

Visitors to the site reported a significant sense of virtual community, which correlates with their usage of the site—that is, the sense of virtual community strongly correlates with usage of the site for social updates; so, the more one uses the site for social updates, the stronger one feels embedded in the virtual community. In fact, receiving social updates from Katif.net (as well as reading blogs and opinion pieces) is positively and significantly correlated with all other uses of the site—the more one uses the site for social updates, the more one uses the site for all other purposes.

The case of Katif.net nicely demonstrates the value that the Internet can serve in the shaping and reshaping of our communities, indicating that the Internet not only connects people across the globe but binds those who reside in proximity (i.e., Cohill & Kavanaugh, 1999; Matei & Bell-Rokeach, 2002). Academic studies of collaboration online often examine how projects such as Wikipedia thrive, benefiting as they do from content contributed by volunteers worldwide with no prior acquaintance and no prospect of a common future (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005; Lev-On & Hardin, 2007). What differentiates Katif.net from these other collaborations is that the people who use the site have deep, strong personal connections independent of the Internet. The results presented here show that the site is a vehicle to express and nurture those preexisting bonds, even as the community on the ground has deterritorialized.

More so, Katif.net serves as a replacement for the failings of the official response to the needs of residents as members of displaced communities. The mismanaged relocation efforts drove many residents of the Gush to Katif.net to share tips, vent, or simply interact in the face of significant events in their lives.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of Katif.net, the Web site seemed more in tune with the evacuees' needs, and it provided them a superior path to address their grievances and needs when compared to the traditional media outlets. Interestingly and perhaps counterintuitively, the older and less affluent members of the Katif.net community reported a higher sense of community.

It seems that Katif.net and the relocated communities of the former Gush Katif represent an excellent resource for the study of social cohesiveness under adverse conditions and the role of the Internet to create and foster such bonds. In a continuing study, I would analyze how the entire population of evacuees from Gush Katif refer to

the Internet in general and to Katif.net in particular and if they attribute the same importance to the site as its followers do.

Still, it seems that even after 3 years of living in new but still temporary communities, many former residents of the Gush still felt strongly about using the Internet—specifically, Katif.net—to stay updated and, more important, maintain community ties and keep in touch.

### **Acknowledgments**

Many thanks to Jason Reich, Odelia Adler, Ruth Margolin, Sarit Mazouz, Vadim Turkov, and Chen Sabag. Special thanks to Motti and Elchanan Sender for their assistance and support.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author expresses his gratitude to the Authority of Research and Development in Ariel University Center, for its generous financial support.

### **Notes**

1. Data received from Vaad Mityashvey Gush Katif, May 2008.
2. Data provided by Vaad Mityashvey Gush Katif, May 2008.
3. A 2007 survey by Dun & Bradstreet Israel shows that 72% of Israeli households are online, 95% of which have a broadband connection. Adult Internet users surf the Web 37.4 hours per month, the second highest in the world (see <http://www.dbisrael.co.il/NewsShowHeb1.asp?idnum=412>).
4. Interview with Motti Sender, April 2008.
5. Interview with Motti Sender, April 2008.
6. From <http://www.new.katif.net/text.php?page=68> (English translation mine).
7. Interview with Motti Sender, April 2008.
8. The only comparable case study that I came across at the time of writing was Skinner's account (forthcoming) of the residents of the Island of Montserrat who had to evacuate the island after a volcanic eruption and regrouped online. For more on disengagement and migration from virtual communities, see Papargyris and Poulymenakou (2009), Pearce and Artemesia (2007), and Kazmer (2007).
9. Family income was coded as a dichotomous variable ranging from 1 (family income a lot below average) to 5 (a lot above average).
10. For equivalent reports of online interactions "filling the gap" when government fails to act as an effective manager, see Leach (2005), on a Web-based campaign that aimed at revising MMR (measles–mumps–rubella) immunization policies; Shklovski, Palen, and Sutton (2008), on the uses of virtual communities after Hurricane Katrina; and my earlier work (Lev-On, 2009a), on uses of such communities for interpersonal communication and mobilization during the 2006 war between Israel and Hizbullah.

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## Bio

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