ELSEVIER

E-empowerment: Empowerment by the Internet

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Abstract

This article focuses on the concept of empowerment and the ways in which the Internet is being utilized as an empowering tool. This analysis ranges from the personal to the global levels and the consequences of that empowerment are also discussed. We propose a four-level model that serves to explain what we term E-empowerment and the effects that can be observed at each of the four levels, ranging from (1) the personal; (2) the interpersonal; (3) group; and (4) citizenship. The potential for future development of E-empowerment is also discussed.
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1. Introduction: What is Empowerment?

Empowerment is a concept that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems and proactive behavior to social policy and social change (Rappaport, 1984). In other words, empowerment links the individual and his or her well-being to the wider social and political environment in which he or she functions. From a psychological perspective, empowerment links mental health and well-being to mutual help and

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to the creation of a responsive community (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Indeed, personal and social change relies extensively on various methods of empowerment (Bandura, 1988; Ozer & Bandura, 1990).

Distinct theories of empowerment have been developed for the processes that occur at the individual, group and organizational levels, and in the wider community. As Zimmerman (1995) notes, different empowerment processes are at work and empowerment takes different forms within these various contexts and thus, a single global measure of empowerment may be neither possible nor desirable.

On an individual level, empowerment refers to the process by which an individual acquires or strengthens the necessary psychological resources that will enable goal achievement. At this level, empowerment is often confused with related psychological constructs such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, control, and competence. Certainly it is the case that these constructs are, indeed, often intimately linked with empowerment processes and outcomes. For instance, gains in self-efficacy or in self-esteem can result not only in a greater subjective sense of empowerment for the individual, but also enable the individual to respond to his or her environment in such a way as to become more empowered. Bandura (1988, 1990) argues that the majority of methods of empowerment operate through the self-efficacy mechanism.

Spreitzer (1995, 1996) identifies four distinct cognitive dimensions of empowerment as it applies to the organizational level: meaning (e.g., beliefs and attitudes), competence, self-determination, and impact. Fawcett et al. (1995) developed a contextual-behavioral model of empowerment to address the process at the community level. They identified four main strategies necessary for effective community empowerment to occur. In this context, they suggest that it is necessary for experience and competence to be enhanced, for improvements to take place in the group structure and capacity, for environmental support and resources to be enhanced, and for there to be a reduction in social and environmental barriers.

While there are many other theoretical models addressing empowerment, they all emphasize the need for competence and experience to be enhanced, beginning at the level of the individual and extending through to the group as a whole. In addition, in order for empowering processes to unfold, they require that barriers be broken, and opportunities for enrichment be enhanced within the social and environmental spheres. It is in these arenas, in particular, that the Internet is an immensely powerful tool with which to open doors.

2. Empowerment on the Internet

This paper suggests a model that may serve to explain what we term E-empowerment and the effects that can be observed at each of four levels, comprising (1) the personal; (2) the interpersonal; (3) group; and (4) citizenship levels. Below, we discuss each of these levels in turn:

2.1. Personal E-empowerment

Several unique aspects of the Internet can serve as catalysts for the E-empowerment processes that we discuss below. Some of these pertain to the personal or individual level, but the majority will only reach fruition within the interpersonal sphere. For instance,

when an individual attempts to reframe or make changes to his or her identity, such changes to the self will only come about if they are socially validated (e.g., Gollwitzer, 1986; Harter, 1993; Heatherton & Nichols, 1994). The Internet offers expanded opportunities for these processes. Below, we discuss the process of (1) reframing identity and (2) increasing self-efficacy and skills.

2.1.1. Reframing identity

Reframing one's identity can be a challenging endeavor that may be fraught with obstacles. Research has long shown that it is difficult for a person to effect changes in self-concept when his or her surrounding social environment remains static. That is, when one is interacting daily in the same milieu, predominantly with family, long-time friends, neighbors and co-workers, attempts to reframe one's identity are rarely successful. These important others are often unwilling to accept, acknowledge, and provide validation for the "reframed" identity that the individual is trying to achieve and, unless and until they do, the new or reframed identity does not become real for him or her (see Gollwitzer, 1986). It is thus, not surprising that changes in one's identity tend to occur when one makes major changes to one's social environment, such as moving to a distant city, changing jobs or schools, and going away to college (Harter, 1993; Ruble, 1994).

One form of online interaction, that may be of benefit to adolescents is their participation in online Internet games. One of the major challenges of the adolescent stage of development is to find the answer to the question "Who am I?" (Erikson, 1968). This can be particularly difficult since, in order to do so, an adolescent needs a sense of coherent identity. Erikson believed that a role-playing game might serve as a means through which people can work at formulating their identity. Many venues on the Internet (e.g., blogs, forums) may serve as a "identity workshops" in which people are able learn and test their social skills (Bruckman, 1992). The online identity game environments may thus be particularly suited to assisting adolescents in their identity search.

2.1.2. Increasing self-efficacy and skills

Increases in self-efficacy have long been shown to lead to increases in both perceived and actual empowerment for the individual. As Ozer and Bandura (1990) pointed out, judgments of personal efficacy affect the choices that people make when they select activities and environments. People actively avoid activities and situations that they believe (often incorrectly) will exceed their coping capabilities (see Betz & Hackett, 1986). Thus, an individual may elect to not pursue the possibility of a job promotion out of fear that he/she may not be able to "measure up"; another, fearing that he/she lacks good social skills, may avoid beneficial social situations; and so forth.

There are four ways in which self-efficacy can be increased (Ozer & Bandura, 1990), the most effective of which are mastery experiences. In mastery situations, individuals are able to engage in exercises that allow them to acquire and practice their skills in a non-threatening environment. In other words, should the exercise not be successful, there will be no significant costs to the individual. For instance, when women who have been victims of sexual assault engage in self-defense programs specifically tailored to teach them how to handle such potential future situations, their feelings of self-efficacy increase over the course of the program. Moreover, they experience a significant reduction in feelings of anxiety and fear which ultimately lead to their engaging in a wider and richer range of activities outside the confines of their homes (see Bandura, 1990).

Self-efficacy can also be strengthened by modeling coping strategies of others, social persuasion, and the changing of physiological states that may be read by others as signs of strength, personal vulnerability or (in)competency. Importantly, social influences within an environment can strongly contribute to personal development by the competencies and interests that they cultivate, as well as by the social networks that they provide.

The Internet provides numerous opportunities for various kinds of mastery experiences that occur in non-threatening environments. The ability to communicate anonymously online is a key element for reducing the sense of threat for many. Should they fail in their attempts to master, for instance, creative writing, the psychological cost of such failure is significantly lessened, as compared to what it would be, were this failure to occur among one's family or friends. Furthermore, should this attempt meet with outright rejection or derision, the sting of that negative response is likely to be significantly less if it originates from strangers, rather than from those to whom one is close. Indeed, as Betz and Hackett (1986) note, fear of humiliation or rejection by one's intimate circle is a primary reason that many refrain from attempting to gain new skills or to enter into situations that may exceed their current capabilities.

Other aspects of online communication open the door to opportunities to increase self-efficacy for others. Research has shown, for instance, that individuals who suffer from high levels of social anxiety benefit from interacting in small groups online because the factors that bring on their anxiety in face-to-face situations are absent in text-based Internet interaction (see McKenna & Seidman, 2006). When these individuals interact with others face-to-face, they not only feel nervous, uncomfortable, and timid and take a less active role in the interaction, but they are also perceived by others as being nervous, shy, lacking social skills and liked less well than those who are more outgoing and non-anxious. In online interactions they may feel, act, and are perceived as likable, non-anxious, and outgoing individuals. Instead of taking a backseat role in interactions online, they are as likely as their outgoing peers to take a leadership role in the online group according to peer evaluations. These positive mastery situations, along with the social skills they practice and gain through them, should lead to greater self-efficacy over time. For others increases in self-efficacy may arise from the many opportunities in online environments to observe the behavioral and interpersonal strategies of others and modeling those that appear successful, by encouragement and support they receive for pursuing their interests by fellow group members.

2.2. The dynamic duo: the interpersonal level

E-empowerment processes that take place on the interpersonal level can result in powerful outcomes for the individuals involved. Changes can occur in the individual's sense of self and identity and to his or her emotional and psychological well-being. E-empowerment at this level can lead to behavior change and shifts in attitudes, the strengthening of existing relationships, and the formation of new ones. Importantly, these are dynamic processes that unfold via the interplay between individuals interacting online and are facilitated by unique properties of the online environment. Indeed, properties unique to the Internet have proven to be critical factors for setting many of these processes in motion and allowing them successfully to unfold. This is particularly the case for the empowering processes involved in (1) social compensation, (2) heightened self-disclosure, (3) stereotype

use reduction, and (4) bridging cross-cultural boundaries, while having a strong impact on (5) effective one-on-one supervision, as will be discussed in more detail below.

2.2.1. Social compensation

Internet interaction allows people to have significant control over the communication, as it is carried out at the users' choice of location and at their convenience. Moreover, users are able to exercise greater control over their part of the interaction. Not only are they able to choose what, when, and how far to disclose personal information, they are able to edit responses before replying, and, in some cases may choose to remain wholly anonymous, or communicate using a pseudonym or take on a new persona.

From the perspective of the user, this creates a highly protected environment. This greater sense of control and security may encourage users to engage in the kinds of self-disclosure that cultivate close social ties through the net. Indeed, the evidence suggests that, on the Internet, the poor (in terms of social contacts) do get richer. Findings indicate that is particularly so in the case of introverts, neurotics (Amichai-Hamburger, 2005; Maldonado, Mora, Garcia, & Edipo, 2001), the lonely, those suffering from social anxiety (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002), and people with physical disabilities (Brennan, Moore, & Smyth, 1992; Kanaley, 1995). Amichai-Hamburger (2002) pointed out that the Internet allows people to express the contrasting sides of their personality. They thus have a platform to reframe their social abilities. The ability of people with poor social skills to use the net successfully, and to form enduring relationships constitutes a significant demonstration of E-empowerment. Further, longitudinal studies suggest that the formation of such close online relationships is associated with a significant reduction in feelings of loneliness and social anxiety (McKenna et al., 2002), and that in many cases lonely and socially anxious individuals successfully bring their important online relationships into their everyday, face-to-face (FtF) lives.

2.2.2. High self-disclosure

Typically, before any significant FtF interaction can take place, it is necessary to build trust. Only once trust has been established, people will allow themselves to open up and disclose intimate information. This is true for both friendships and romantic relationships. Without trust, people will be concerned about the possibilities and consequences of intimate information reaching the wrong places and harming them (Derlega & Chaiken, 1977). According to the research of McKenna and Bargh (2000) and McKenna et al. (2002), the setting provided by the Internet creates unique conditions. In this case, the online environment creates a situation where dyadic interaction may be seen as akin to the "strangers-on-the-train" phenomenon (Rubin, 1975), whereby people disclose quite intimate information to others, whom they have no reasonable expectation of encountering again. If followed up, as is often the case online, such disclosures can lay the foundation for continuing and close relationships. Indeed, disclosures made online to others are often more deeply intimate than those made to others in a FtF environment. Online, people tend to engage in quite high levels of intimate disclosure and will enter into this type of communication relatively soon after forming a new online acquaintance (McKenna, Buffardi, & Seidman, 2005). This kind of E-empowerment enables people to build deep and enduring relationships with others and to strengthen existing relationships.

2.2.3. Stereotype use reduction

Stereotyping is a generalized belief about members of a particular group (e.g., women, Asians, the elderly, Jews). A stereotype includes beliefs about personality traits, physical and mental characteristics, and expected behavior (Biernat & Thompson, 2002; Twenge, 1999). Negative stereotyping is likely to lead to prejudice and discrimination. Insidiously, stereotypes can be activated automatically and operate unconsciously to affect the judgments one forms and the way one behaves toward members of a stereotyped group (e.g., Bargh, 1989). That is, without being aware that we are doing so, we habitually and automatically use physically available features or other identity cues (e.g., ethnically identified names) to immediately categorize others (e.g., by their ethnicity, attractiveness, age; Bargh, 1989; Brewer, 1988). Research has shown that first impressions tend to be lasting impressions. That is, it is rather difficult to get past our first impressions (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1991) because people tend to selectively focus on information that confirms rather than disconfirms their initial judgment when they interact with these same people again (e.g., Higgins & Bargh, 1987). Furthermore, the expectations others form based on their first impression may actually elicit confirmatory behavior from the target (Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977).

When interactions take place online, physical cues are often not immediately apparent and thus do not influence the impressions that are formed or become a barrier to potential relationships. Instead, impressions are formed on very different criteria. Rather than basing impressions on superficial features, such as attractiveness, the opinions expressed and the information about the self that is revealed become the basis of first impressions (e.g., Ben-Ze'ev, 2005; McKenna et al., 2002). These alternate criteria for impression formation have been shown to have very powerful effects on the assessment and treatment of others. This is clearly very important for people who belong to negatively stereotyped groups. When physical characteristics are unavailable, the influence they would otherwise exert is rendered irrelevant and people are judged according to their contribution to the interaction, community, or project. Should a positive impression be formed, based on the alternate criteria, research has shown that when those potentially biasing features do come into evidence (e.g., the participants move from the Internet to meeting in person), their influence is likely to be mitigated and the initial positive impression is maintained, and often enhanced (e.g., Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002).

2.2.4. The ability to promote cross-cultural dialogue

The advent of online forums and blogs also encourages dialogue and contact between individuals from opposing sides during a conflict, as for example occurred during the 2006 Israel–Lebanon War (see Totten, 2006). Different online projects promote cross-cultural dialogues beyond the nation's boundaries. For example, the Good Neighbors project (http://www.gnblog.com) facilitates an Israeli-Arab dialogue among bloggers from both sides of the conflict. Nevertheless, it is important to note that virtual freedom is not without its limitations. In December 2007, Syria announced it was blocking FaceBook.com in an attempt to block the interactions that were flourishing between Israeli and Syrian participants.

2.2.5. One-on-one supervision

In the Western world, people live very pressured lives with high levels of job burnout. This is especially the case in certain work environments (Maslach & Leiter, 1997), for

example in high-tech companies where employees are expected to work long hours in an extremely demanding work-culture (Westman & Etzion, 2002). In this "Catch 22" situation, people are often unable to find the time to seek professional assistance. However, without such advice and support, they are likely to suffer from burnout and consequential dropout. Through the Internet, it is possible to offer highly professional supervision on a one-to-one basis. (Oravec, 2000). Organizations can put in place a system of online supervision for their workers, and because geographic distances are not an issue and both parties may participate in supervision sessions at places of their choosing, it may well be easier than in an offline situation to find a mutually convenient time for supervision and assistance. Further, workers may feel more comfortable seeking out assistance or discussing work-related difficulties that arise via a more casual online exchange than they would in a more formal setting.

2.3. Group level

The Internet is accessed every day by many millions of users, all of whom have various interests. This, together with the ease with which the user can find information about different topics, creates a fertile ground for groups to develop and flourish. There are several important factors which encourage E-empowerment on the group level: (1) finding similar others; (2) group reinforcement; (3) variety of group decision-making tools; and (4) E-vision and group crystallization.

2.3.1. Finding similar others

Aristotle argued that similarity causes attraction (Aristotle, 1932) and many empirical studies provide evidence to support this assertion (e.g., Cann, Calhoun, & Banks, 1997; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000). Being a member of a group that shares common interests and goals enhances self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Participants in Internet groups report that, as a result of their membership, they experience a reduction in feelings of loneliness and enjoy significantly more social contacts. Members of Internet groups tend to develop group identification, sometimes even faster than participants in offline groups, and display cooperative behavior to the same extent as members of offline groups (McKenna & Green, 2002).

People with hidden social stigmas face two major psychological impediments. First, they experience difficulties in detecting similar others in their everyday environment, a situation that leads to feelings of loneliness, alienation, and estrangement from the wider community and even from their family and friends whom they fear (often correctly) would not accept them should they know "the real me". Secondly, those around them are likely to express negative opinions about members of this stigmatized group (e.g., expressing homophobic views) in front of the individual who is "in the closet". This results in lowered self-esteem and self-worth, and increases the sense of alienation and loneliness for those with marginalized and concealable identity aspects (Frable, 1993). While finding such similar others in the everyday environment can be difficult, this is not the case on the Internet where groups and individuals who share almost any interest imaginable can be readily found. Finding similar others online who share this marginalized self-aspect has been shown to lead to decreased feelings of cultural estrangement and alienation. When an individual takes an active part in a group comprising such similar individuals, group participation leads to increased self-acceptance, enhanced self-esteem, and further reduction in

alienation and estrangement. Indeed, a significant percentage of those taking part in such stigmatized groups online "come out" to their close family and friends and reveal the stigmatized aspect of identity as a direct result of their online participation (McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

2.3.2. Group reinforcement

The norming stage is a very important part of the development of every group (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). During this stage, the group becomes more cohesive and group identification increases. This phase is completed when there is a general acceptance of the way things should be done. These norms create an informal guide to the workings of the group, including spoken and unspoken group rules regarding behavior (Hackman, 1992). They supply members with rewards when they obey and with punishments when they do not. The group also provides role models which promote appropriate behavior to other members of the group. Research has shown that, particularly when group members interact online with some degree of anonymity or sense of de-individuation, groups norms are strengthened and there is greater adherence to those norms than typically occurs in FtF group environments (see Spears, Lea, Corneliussen, Postmes, & Ter Haar, 2002a; Spears, Postmes, Lea, & Wolbert, 2002b). Furthermore, studies have shown that the social support that develops within online groups leads to an increased willingness to express normative attitudes against a powerful outgroup. These studies reveal the importance of computer mediated communication (CMC) as a medium for communicating and coordinating the social support central to effective collective action (see Spears et al., 2002a; Spears et al., 2002b).

2.3.3. Variety of group decision-making tools

Projects run through the Internet benefit from their capacity to receive ideas from all the group members in efficient and effective ways. This is relevant to any form of group on the Internet, but is especially true for virtual teams in organizations. The idea of group brainstorming was originally formulated by Osborn (1957), and the development to electronic Brain Storming (EBS) allows input to be synchronously presented to the whole group and all participants may contribute simultaneously, thus eliminating problems of delay and failure to listen. In addition, participants feel sufficiently protected to express themselves freely (Cooper, Gallupe, Pollard, & Cadsby, 1998). DeRosa, Smith, and Hantula (2007) performed a Meta analysis and found that EBS groups were more productive than FtF groups. Using the EBS tool for discussing important and challenging issues can be very beneficial, as it allows for the views of a variety of people to be articulated. This leads, not only to a beneficial thinking process, but also, by allowing each member to have a voice, it enables all members to feel part of the group, in general, and part of the group decision-making, in particular. When used properly, it can serve as an important tool, causing people to feel a significant part of the organization, including those members who may be a great distance away. In this way, the remote individual may be empowered by the net to become a significant and integral part of the virtual team.

2.3.4. E-vision and group crystallization

The fact that an increasing number of work teams are either partly or wholly carried out in a virtual environment increases the importance of the E-leader in transferring the group vision directly to each group member. Avolio, Kahai, and Dodge (2000) pointed

out that, for the E-leader, the Internet is not just the context in which his or her leadership takes place, but the construct itself. They suggest that transformational leadership characteristics, such as individualized consideration (giving the followers all the support they need to succeed in their tasks); inspirational motivation (the ability to communicate the importance of the group goals through the use of symbols); and intellectual stimulation (showing followers how to recognize the challenges in their lives and how to transform them into opportunities) may be transmitted through the Internet. In an offline project, as the group grows, the structure is likely to become more hierarchical and the ability to maintain direct contact between the group leader and group members is reduced. On the Internet, this is not the case; the size of the group will not prevent the leader from being in direct contact with the members. At the touch of a button, leaders of virtual groups may send a film of their vision, an interactive message, or even talk to the group online (Avolio & Kahai, 2003). The ability of the E-leader through technology to E-empower vast numbers of people over huge distances simultaneously does not have an equivalent in the offline world.

2.4. Citizenship

The web has brought about unprecedented opportunities for civil activity, promoting the interaction between government and citizens. Among them are, E-voting, E-government tools and public debate through online watchdog groups. These and other cyberspace interactions have resulted in an online public-style discourse empowering citizens on three levels: (1) political participation; (2) accessibility; and (3) the ability to supervise and influence government decisions. The consequences of such E-empowerment tools have far-reaching implications for the political sphere on local, national, and international levels.

2.4.1. Political participation

The term E-government refers to the government's use of the web to interact with citizens, allowing them to express opinions and complaints on political matters (see Williamson, 2004). In its most successful form, E-governance can empower citizens to feel that they may make a significant contribution to the running of their locality or even their country. However, it is vital that E-government is seen to be trustworthy and honest; if not, it will be perceived by the public as a cheap manipulation and will significantly damage the relationship between citizens and government.

Indeed, a variety of studies have shown that civic involvement increases substantially with the use of the web (e.g., Borgida & Stark, 2004; Kraut et al., 2002). Projects such as Directgovkids.co.uk (where children learn the values of democracy and the importance of political participation) and online referendums are an important factor in countering feelings of alienation and insignificance among citizens.

In addition, several cases have shown that E-voting also contributes to voting turnout. In the first binding political vote in Arizona in March, 2000, there was a 676% increase in voter turnout. Since then, many governments have considered the possibility of conducting national elections through E-voting. In February 2007, Estonia held the first national E-voting election; 30,000 out of 900,000 citizens with the right to vote, voted using with their electronic encoded "smart" IDs.

2.4.2. Accessibility

E-government tools also allow citizens to provide feedback and participate in active discussions regarding community initiatives and legislative issues. Government ministries, candidates for election, and government social services departments provide extensive information about their services online. Citizens can quickly find all manner of data, ranging from, for example, comparative stances taken by elected or potential representatives, agency opening times, and forms required for particular services. Transactions between citizens and government are increasingly taking place online. These include financial payments, driving license renewals, downloading and filling out of tax forms, and filing for benefits. Offline, these matters are generally considered to be time-consuming, inefficient, and often frustrating experiences, especially to those with time constraints and physical disabilities.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that there are still major challenges that need to be overcome before the implementation of E-government methods can be said to have been an overall success. Privacy matters, most of all, still posit major challenges: for example, in 2007 in two separate incidents in the UK, the personal details of 25 million citizens receiving child benefit and 3 million British learner drivers who had applied for the ''theory test'' component of their driving license were lost, possibly stolen. Currently, scholars and online security companies are looking for solutions to counter the risk factors involved in E-government applications (see for example Siriluck, 2007; White & Jones, 2007).

2.4.3. The ability to supervise and influence government decisions

Being a net citizen grants a voice in a community of hundreds of millions of people. By taking part in discussion groups and forums, net citizens are able to share knowledge and data with others around the world, increasing their sense of political power and their feeling of belonging to a global community. The web empowers ''informed citizenship'' through engendering the creation of a fruitful debate regarding civil and government issues among political activists and critics via online watchdog groups (e.g.., Liberty in the UK, see http://www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk/) and civil societies organizations (Everard, 1999; Falk, 2000). Similar initiatives, which allow close examination of government decisions and even provide encouragement for citizens to post their own suggestions for legislation, are taking place around the world. For example, in the USA, the WashingtonWatch.com initiative allows citizen debates regarding regulations, while in Israel, several members of the Israeli parliament regularly promote legislation based on the content of the Knesset 2 project (http://www.knesset2.org.il), a forum for citizens to suggest ideas for future law-making.

Dan Gilmor, author of ''We, the Media'', calls the ability of citizens to gather online and challenge government policy, 'distributive journalism', which is *analogous to any project or problem that can be broken up into little pieces, where lots of people can work in parallel on small parts of the bigger question and collectively – and relatively quickly – bring to bear lots of individual knowledge and/or energy to the matter. Some open-source software projects work this way. The important thing is the parallel activity by large numbers of people, in service of something that would be difficult if not impossible for any one or small group of them to do alone, at least in a timely way* (from Dan Gilmore's blog, see http://dangillmor.typepad.com/dan_gillmor_on_grassroots/2005/01/distributed_jou.html).

Numerous events also illustrate the potential of the web in mobilizing protest against perceived injustices. For example, in the UK in 2006, Tony Blair responded on the official

10 Downing Street website to an online poll, where the great majority of the 1.8 million British citizens polled had voted against the government's decision to charge a toll on several major roads (retrieved from http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6381153.stm). In response to the public's protest, Blair said that this was the beginning of the debate regarding the legislation rather than a close-ended decision. It is interesting to note that the petition was set up by Peter Roberts, a 46-year-old account manager, who claimed that the government decision was unfair to poorer people and decided to take action.

In addition, successful web forums and blogs can attract millions and mobilize global public opinion. For example, during the Second Lebanon War, bloggers discovered and widely publicized the fact that photographs of devastation which were appearing on news outlets around the world had been altered in order to make the situation appear more dramatic. This exposure resulted in sweeping changes being instituted by Reuters and other news agencies. This is a case where the global resonance carried by individuals challenged a reputable global news agency and potentially sensitized citizens to the credibility of images presented by the mass media. Perhaps the most memorable protest mobilized by the web, however, was the 1999 anti-WTO campaign in Seattle. where online protest challenged global policies by organizing and coordinating a mobilization of caravans from throughout the United States to take protestors to Seattle. This is an example of what Brecher and his colleagues (2000) described as "globalization from below".

Nevertheless, it is important to note that in the main, such groups are able to mobilize and impact in Western, democratic countries, whereas authoritarian governments regularly monitor and often censor the online activity of watchdog groups. Several studies have documented the successful blockage of mobilization in non-democratic regimes such as China, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore (Dalpino, 2000; Hartford, 2000).

3. Final word

Victor Frankl (1963) argued that *what man actually needs is not a tensionless state, but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him (p. 166)*. As the examples discussed above indicate, the Internet is an especially apt tool for people wishing "to search and find meaning".

The Internet offers abundant means through which individuals can, and do, empower themselves, their groups, their causes, and their countries. On the Internet, average citizens may find their voice more easily than they can in the offline world and can be heard much farther away. However, there are two important aspects that should be stressed. First, E-empowerment is not a given and will not occur simply by connecting every citizen of the world to the Internet. Rather, empowering tools and opportunities are available via CMC – far more of them than exist in the offline domain – but unless an individual takes advantage of them, many of the processes that lead to greater empowerment of the individual will not occur. Secondly, this article has concentrated on the positive aspects of empowerment via the Internet, and although not part of the scope of this paper, it is important to remember that the consequences of empowerment, the confidence, self efficacy, and the emboldened pursuit of previously stifled, deep-seated desires, are not always a positive occurrence.. The same processes that empower individuals in realms that are considered positive by any particular society will also occur for in non-sanctioned arenas. Active group involvement with similar others will, equally strengthen the social identity and

self-acceptance of individuals who suffers from epilepsy as it will the pedophiles. Grass-roots groups with a prosocial agenda will be empowered, but so, too, will those who promote hate and violence. This said, it is vital that the positive potential of the Internet as a tool for empowerment must not be lost, rather ways must be found to limit the access and actions of those who wish to take this unique tool for good and utilize it for negative purposes.

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