Immediate Release

The GovLab at NYU Tandon releases report on the impact of online communities and role of their leaders

BROOKLYN, New York, Tuesday, February 23, 2021 – Today, The Governance Lab (The GovLab) at the NYU Tandon School of Engineering released a report, "The Power of Virtual Communities," which examines the role online groups play in creating opportunities for people to build new kinds of meaningful communities they often could not form in real space.

This research was built on interviews with 50 Facebook communities, 26 experts from academia and industry, unique access to Facebook's underlying research and an original global survey conducted by YouGov of 15,000 people in 15 markets who are currently members of online and in-person communities.

More than 1.8 billion people use Facebook Groups every month, and more than half of all users are in five or more groups. Additionally, there are more than 70 million admins and moderators running active Facebook groups.

"Around the world, people are coming together — bonded by a common interest — into online communities that lend real meaning to their lives," said Beth Simone Noveck, director of The GovLab. "This brief report is, we hope, the beginning of greater and much needed study of online groups and their impact on social and political life."

The study shows that in 11 of the 15 nations surveyed, the largest proportion of people said the most important group in their lives is primarily online. Additionally, online groups attract members and leaders who are marginalized in the physical societies they inhabit, giving them new opportunities to form communities beyond traditional in-person gatherings.

Many of these Facebook groups cut across traditional social groupings and bring together people around a shared trait or interest:

- [Female IN (FIN)](#), created as a safe space for women in the Nigerian diaspora to discuss and seek support for problems associated with such challenges as relationship struggles, health issues, abuse, grief and loss. Female IN grew by word-of-mouth into a 1.8 million-person community with members in more than 100 countries.
- [Surviving Hijab](#) encourages its 920,000 female members to take up or continue wearing the Muslim head covering in the face of political and social criticism.
- [Blind PenPals](#) enables its 7,000 blind and visually impaired members to share stories and advice.
- [Canterbury Residents Group](#) acts as a public square in the British city of Canterbury and has 38,000 members, about the same size as the city's population.
- [Subtle Asian Traits](#), which began as a modest initiative among nine young Australians of Chinese background to share funny memes about their Asian heritage, has expanded to a group of 1.82 million people who discuss and share the experience of growing up Asian in mostly majority-White societies.

The GovLab's report findings note that:

- Membership in online communities confers a strong sense of community, the lack of physical proximity notwithstanding.
- In many cases online groups attract members and leaders who are marginalized in the physical societies they inhabit, and who use the platform to build new kinds of communities that would be difficult to form otherwise.
- New kinds of community leaders have emerged in these groups with unique skills in moderating often divisive dialogues, sometimes among millions of members.
- Most groups are run as a labor of love; many leaders are neither trained nor paid and the rules that govern their internal operations are often uncodified and the hosting platform - in this case Facebook - holds significant power over their operations and future.

Further, results from the YouGov survey and the interviews with group leaders indicated that the three most essential traits and behaviors for leaders to exhibit were welcoming differences of opinions, being visible and communicating well, and acting ethically at all times.

This report further shines a light on the role leaders have and why it is important to further support them in running their community.

You can download the full report and the executive summary [here](#).

__About The Governance Lab at the NYU Tandon School of Engineering__
The Governance Lab's mission is to improve people's lives by changing the way we govern. Our goal at The GovLab is to strengthen the ability of institutions — including but not limited to governments — and people to work more openly, collaboratively, effectively, and legitimately to make better decisions and solve public problems. We believe that increased availability and use of data, new ways to leverage the capacity, intelligence, and expertise of people in the problem-solving process, combined with new advances in technology and science, can transform governance. We approach each challenge and opportunity in an interdisciplinary, collaborative way, irrespective of the problem, sector, geography, and level of government. For more information, visit [thegovlab.org](#).

About the New York University Tandon School of Engineering

The NYU Tandon School of Engineering dates to 1854, the founding date for both the New York University School of Civil Engineering and Architecture and the Brooklyn Collegiate and Polytechnic Institute. A January 2014 merger created a comprehensive school of education and research in engineering and applied sciences as part of a global university, with close connections to engineering programs at NYU Abu Dhabi and NYU Shanghai. NYU Tandon is rooted in a vibrant tradition of entrepreneurship, intellectual curiosity, and innovative solutions to humanity's most pressing global challenges. Research at Tandon focuses on vital intersections between communications/IT, cybersecurity, and data science/AI/robotics systems and tools and critical areas of society that they influence, including emerging media, health, sustainability, and urban living. We believe diversity is integral to excellence, and are creating a vibrant, inclusive, and equitable environment for all of our students, faculty and staff. For more information, visit engineering.nyu.edu.

###