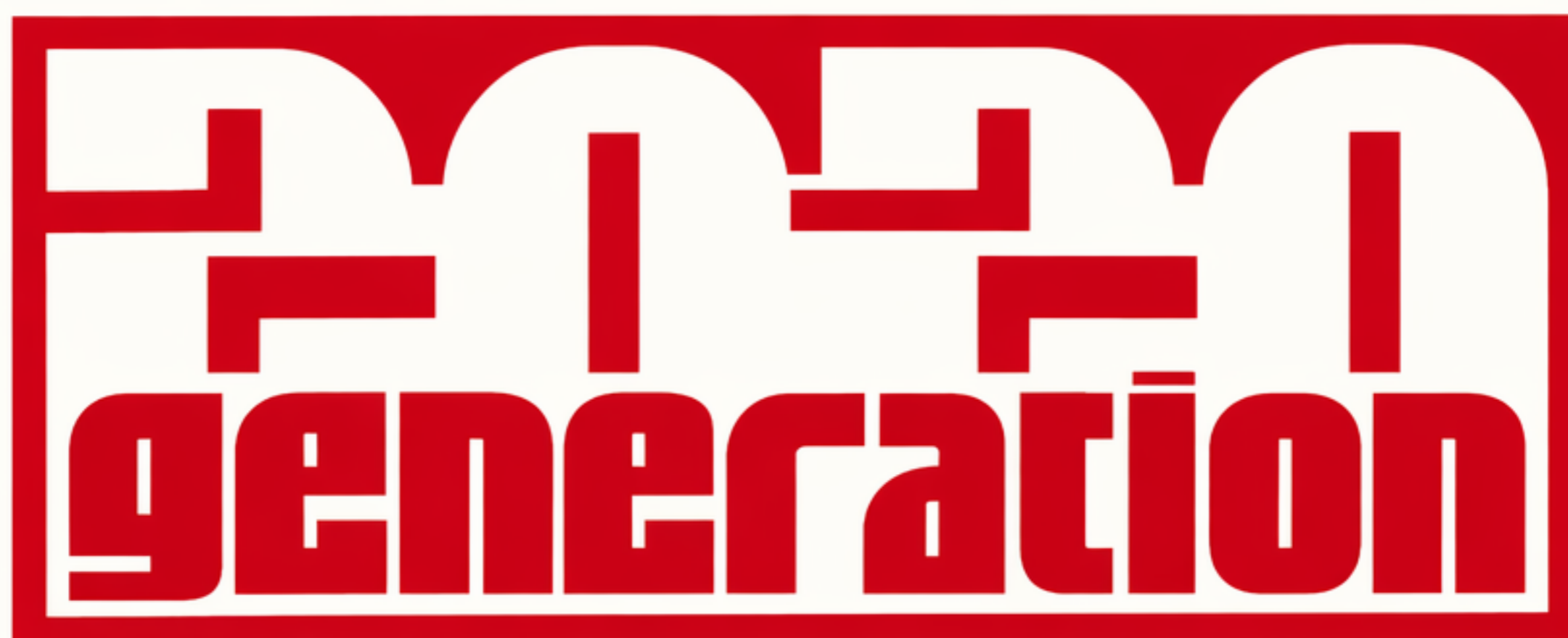


Beyond the Feed

**Social networks and political agenda-setting
on the internet**



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Left-Wing Alternatives

Dreamers of Networks - The Story of Kapcsolat.hu

Three years ago, when registering on iwiw still carried prestige, and most Hungarian young people had heard about Facebook or MySpace only by word of mouth, when virtual community spaces had not yet begun to flourish, while other kinds of meetings and relationships were already starting to break down; when everyone had already seen *The Matrix*, but only the boldest were enchanted by the cyber-magic of the new Japanese films; when we were only beginning to grasp what networking might mean, the new science of networks, and stood somewhat alarmed in the flood of globalization's new vocabularies, we thought that this newly experienced language, this virtual culture, would gradually, in its own natural way, seep into our everyday lives, be present in our social relations, and soon transform our ideas about the world and society.

And if our social relations, our way of life, were undergoing such a revolutionary change, then this would not leave untouched our relationship to politics, to political systems, and to politicians themselves - or so we thought. And the experience of recent years proved that we were right. Even if, in Hungary, online political opinion-forming and mobilization were still very much in their infancy. Even if we were among the first - with all the advantages of that, and all the disadvantages arising from inexperience.

We knew, we felt, that the virtual sphere represented a form of political socialization, a communication channel that broke out of the earlier, familiar patterns; and for those able to use it, it could offer an astonishing competitive advantage over opponents stuck in traditional forms of communication. In this spirit, three years ago we began to study the structure and appeal of international community sites, to analyse existing applications, and to uncover the secret: what visitors to a given site like to use, and which applications fail to achieve their aim.

Our basic idea has not changed: we believe that through conversations and debates it is possible to reach conscious choice - in the political dimension as well. The



internet has by now become one of the primary sources of information for regular users, and this observation applies not only to the world of news and facts. It is equally information for us how someone else diets, what they read, which film they like – even if in reality we do not know them. The experiences and opinions of others influence our picture of the world at least as strongly as the phenomena and interconnections we experience ourselves. The internet itself, and above all community spaces, expand the possibilities of gaining experience, enrich human relationships, rationalize them, and make the endless flow of incoming information searchable and filterable. [Since Fritz Machlup's first study (1962), many researchers have examined, analysed and evaluated the main characteristics and attributes of the information society. Among the representatives of the "new" paradigm there is no dispute that, in our present society, information has become a factor of power: power belongs to those who possess and distribute the information and knowledge accumulated in different strata of society. Manuel Castells (2000) takes this theory further in his study of the specific dynamics and operation of networks, reformulating spaces and information nodes, and highlighting their unstable structures.]

Returning to the previous thought: the introduction of community spaces into politics is especially important precisely because of their socializing properties. The fact that we can exchange ideas on more and more issues in life makes us more credible to one another. If we share similar views on several questions, a common development, a common way of thinking about public life may begin.

When we conceived Kapcsolat.hu, we imagined a socializing community site that would primarily increase the political interest of young people, pulling them out of the public apathy that can be felt at every moment, appealing to the preconception that basic, instinctive curiosity and openness towards one another would awaken interest in the events of political life as well. We have moved forward along this path in a rather halting way, since the experiences of the past two years have not fully confirmed our expectations. But at least, along the way, we have managed to reclaim the word "dream" from the snatchers.



The Beginning

As we have already mentioned, we began researching the characteristics of online communities in 2005, analysing English, German and French websites. At first we focused primarily on civil organizations, but relatively soon we decided that it was worth broadening the spectrum of communities under examination: from that point onward, the range of analysed subjects also extended to virtual communities organized within the dimension of politics. We looked at the online techniques of international civil initiatives and studied how political parties and organizations make use of the opportunities offered by the internet and by technology. After a year of work, we systematized and evaluated our experiences from the perspective of how the Hungarian left could make use of these results. This is how the first concept of a domestic public-affairs community site was born.

At the same time, the Táncsics Foundation began building the foundations of its own community communication network, not in virtual space but in real life. It was therefore not difficult to link the two concepts: under the professional leadership of Ferenc Baja, the first Hungarian online community space began its path toward realization.

Online Spaces

In 2006, online communities were characterized by generality - something that, incidentally, can still largely be observed today. In Hungary there was practically no example of a special community being organized online around particular values using Web 2.0 techniques. International examples, however, did exist, and they enjoyed enormous popularity. Among those we studied, the most carefully thought-out and most professionally built community site was www.bbyo.org, which was organized around religious values and generational considerations. Thanks to the popularity of Web 2.0, general community spaces multiplied explosively and became mass phenomena, so we could see that the legitimacy of new community spaces could now only be



won through organization along values. In this field, however, in specialization there is still practically always free capacity.

Goals

We observed that in the international political sphere, public-life websites provided the classic Web 2.0 applications; there were few examples where they added targeted, specialized modules to the spaces they had created.

Therefore we wanted to create an online community space that specifically made debate possible on issues of public life and politics. Our aim was to create a kind of community that goes beyond day-to-day political skirmishes and provides a forum for meaningful, cultured debate. From the outset, the goal was to establish an open forum for debate, taking care that it should not close itself off along any one side. To put it more bluntly: we wanted to bury the real trenches – in virtual space.

Beyond the classic arenas of debate – forum, blog, voting – we therefore designed a dedicated campaign module for the site. Our aim was to give users the opportunity to stand up for a cause they felt was their own, to take an active part in smaller or larger initiatives (for example, cleaning up their environment), to enable people sharing common values and goals to find each other more easily, and to set themselves in motion through organization. Today we call this self-reliance. Kapcsolat.hu was created to strengthen citizens' self-reliant attitude and willingness to act. And not necessarily in the primary sense of politicization.

Another not entirely hidden goal of ours was to offer a possibility for the autonomous organization of communities. Kapcsolat.hu was also intended to be an instrument that helps civil organizing. Ninety-five per cent of the site's content is supplied by users themselves – through action and organization.

We provided many opportunities for self-organization: we designed an interactive event calendar, for which in 2007 there was no precedent on political community sites, and even on general community sites this function could only rarely be found. The interactive calendar is a community function whose



help enabled organizing communities to begin an independent life. We fundamentally rewrote this function when changing versions in November 2008, thus providing our users with a much more efficient, more lovable module.

From the outset we knew that the stage would come when different user levels would have to be created, since in a “real” community a person who is merely interested cannot have the same rights as one who does a great deal for its operation. At first there were no registration levels, because we ourselves had not yet seen along what lines the boundaries of the different levels should be drawn, and we found no model to follow, so we had no experience either.

Among the aims of the portal was also to connect voters (or potential / future voters) with decision-makers. For this it was necessary to create the possibility for those who shape our lives within public affairs to be present here as well. As early as 2007 we knew that within a virtual office house we would connect representatives with users, but its form, system and method were not yet clear, since we could not rely on the previous experiences of others in this question either.

Implementation

Programming of the site began in February 2007: in August the test version was launched, and in September we opened the site, so that by then practically anyone could register. But the system was still completely closed: apart from the news, all other content required registration to view. At that time, registration did not yet require only an email address and a password. It was necessary to fill in age, county, town, gender, an “about me” field, and virtual and political orientation. This remained the case until May 2008.

In 2008 we saw that the site could not remain closed, because if we really wanted public debate, opening had to take place in every sense and in every segment. This was reinforced by the relocation of the Gyurcsány blog. In April 2008 it was decided that the Prime Minister's blog would find a new home at Kapcsolat.hu. At the same time we decided to open up the site - with the exception of users' profile pages. We began May with a new design, open content, and the Gyurcsány blog already being written on our site. The Gyurcsány blog



taking over also made registration easier, because previously an email address and a username had been enough - and we had to adapt to this as well. By May we had 3,000 registered members. After the opening, within two months, this climbed to 8,000.

The Recent Past

The simpler registration and easier access to content were also positively received by most users; at the same time the site's traffic tripled. Of course, with this came the problems we had already expected in April.

When a more strongly registered, content-wise closed community is loosened up, one must obviously reckon with negative consequences as well: those who had previously registered could quite rightly claim that users about whom we have almost no information should not be able to use the same functions as those who had earlier provided all the requested information about themselves. After all, the essence of a community site is getting to know one another, and a nickname alone is too little for that.

Therefore we developed the site's new permission levels: at present there are five user levels on the site.

Visitors: those who do not register but simply browse the site. Apart from hidden content and the profile page, they can see everything, but they have no interactive functions and cannot create content.

Interested users: those who only provided a nickname and an email address. They can comment on the Gyurcsány blog and use the forum. They can receive letters and reply to them, but they cannot view profile pages or mark acquaintances, since the ethical condition for entering a community is self-introduction.

Members: those users who reveal more about themselves (name, age, gender, place of residence, about me field); apart from the office house and the hidden-closed functions



they can use everything. They can view the contents of the office house, but the office house does not become interactive for them.

The **Kapcsolat** level is the highest level for users. These are those who give their home address, mobile number and creed. Based on the home address - which is not public - the system links them to their individual constituency representative. By requiring a mobile number, on the one hand we try to reduce multiple registrations, and on the other to convince ourselves that a real person is behind the registration. The user can activate this level with a code received by SMS. In return, the user can use every interactive function, and the hidden and closed communities are also opened to them.

The **Politician** level means those who are in the system as representatives; they open an office in the Virtual Office House.

The introduction of the system described above took place on 15 November 2008.

Virtual Offices

The office house was completed on 1 December 2008. As already mentioned, our goal was to connect users with representatives. In the system, representatives can open offices on a constituency basis. In the office we provide every Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 function for the representative to present themselves and their work. Here they have the opportunity - beyond formal frameworks - to show themselves to their voters in a looser, more personal way.

The representative uses this function as they wish. They are not forced to use every function. If a news page is more appealing to them, they can use that; if they prefer blogging, they can do so without interactive functions left empty and gaping. In the offices we launched a debate module: the representative may initiate a debate on a given proposal and, by adding a short description and attached documents, can collect users' arguments and counter-arguments, to which they may naturally also attach a forum, so that



there is room for more detailed debates as well. The representative receives a graphic display of responses given to the topic (agree / disagree). Like the other users, they also have the campaign module at their disposal, with the help of which we give them the opportunity to stand up for a cause, gather supporters, and organize the supporters into a community.

Yet the most important function is the connection between user and representative: naturally the representative does not see the voters' personal data, but does know which people belong to their constituency. The user can contact their representative at any time, just as the representative can do the same virtually, at any time.

Kapcsolat's Autumn Leaves

Let us note at the outset: our tree regularly sheds its leaves. Late autumn is upon us. Although Kapcsolat.hu was created by a small, enthusiastic group of a few young people, motivated in their work by showing young people who had turned away from politics that there is an example of democratic, cultured debate and meaningful discussion of public issues, to date we have not succeeded in repainting the age pattern of the environment of socialist-party sympathizers as experienced in other forums.

More concretely: the age distribution of users follows the peculiarities of MSZP sympathizers. The proportion of those over 40 is overwhelming, and the most active users also come from the ranks of the middle-aged. It is typical that the most active users close the site politically, and are therefore less tolerant of critical opinions. Yet common sense, the goals and the current social attitude, the depoliticized condition, make it clear: openness is indispensable. It is necessary that we find the key to society, and first of all to the gateway of young people.



Plans

By now we have arrived at the conclusion that a lovable, humorous, interesting, colourful environment reaching beyond politics must be created, so that it can provide young people with a feeling of being at home. Therefore we wish to develop the site's entertainment function. We are rethinking the design and simplifying the site's structure. We can see how much the abundance of content makes life harder for users; we are trying to move towards clear, minimal design and easily transparent content management, since so many new services have been built into the system over the past year and a half that it is worthwhile to reconstruct the structure of the community site.

Kapcsolat.hu, however - and this must be emphasized - is a communication channel, an instrument that can function well and effectively only if behind its own philosophy, which includes not directing or framing the discourse about politics but merely providing space for it, there stands political will, intention and purpose. There must be a will for the left to find new voters, to channel young people into its own organizational system. The intention is to keep in continuous contact with its sympathizers. ... And there is some kind of goal, which can also be translated into a message. We could be the dove, even the modern, fast and likeable kind. But we cannot be either the sender or the message. Let alone the addressee.