

ORGANIZING THE PUBLIC THROUGH FACEBOOK:
A STUDY OF THE ROLE OF NEW MEDIA IN PUBLIC POLICY

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ABSTRACT

The rise of new media has provided new communications platforms for citizens and policymakers. Although some researchers have explained the relationship between internet use and political participation, existing studies do not sufficiently explain how current new media facilitate public participation. This study seeks to explain the role new media played in the policy making process with reference to proposed legislation in Hawaii in 2010, HB444/ SB 232, known as the Civil Unions Bill. In order to gather data for this study, I conducted in-depth interviews with ten Facebook group administrators and seven legislators. Data analysis focused on understanding how new media has been a platform for public participation in the policymaking process. It was found that new media have provided activists with superior alternatives to traditional methods such as flyers, telephone calls, and “snail mail.” Activists have used Facebook, Twitter, e-mail, blogs and websites extensively to provide information relating to Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, and Transgender (LGBT) issues as well as administrate both online and traditional political campaigns. Although activists believe that they were able to mobilize people, most of them do not have a clear idea about the impact new media campaigns have had on other activities such as sign waving, protests, and fundraising events. Conversely, given their own unique set of challenges, legislators are transitioning toward using new media both at the Senate/House level and on an individual level. Public participation in the Civil Unions policy process has increased tremendously with the “e-testimony” facility. Citizen-policy maker interactions at the informal level have also increased with the rise of new media.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| Abstract..... | ii |
| Acknowledgement..... | iii |
| Table of Contents..... | iv |
| Chapter 1: Introduction..... | 1 |
| Chapter 2: Related Literature..... | 30 |
| Chapter 3: Organizing Citizens through Facebook: Perspectives of New Media Activists..... | 43 |
| Chapter 4: Policy Making Processes in Transition: Perspectives of Legislators..... | 81 |
| Chapter 5: Conclusions, Limitations of the Study and Further Research..... | 110 |
| References..... | 118 |

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

New forms of communication emerge with advances in technology, providing the public new-found avenues for interaction. Davis and Owen (1998, 3) describe that these new media find their place in the system of political communications, “often through trial and error.” Further, it was the end of the 1990s when Davis and Owen (1998, 3) claimed that this trial-and-error process began for new media in American politics. By the end of 2010, the discussion of new media was brought to the forefront to such an extent that their use is considered a central part of political struggles in some countries. Current new media, which are characterized mainly by the use of online social networks, blogs, websites, e-mail, Personal Digital Assistants (PDA), and mobile telephone applications, offer people additional ways to perform their roles as citizens. The system of interconnected new media applications seems to have rapidly emerged as a public platform that can play a significant role in shaping public policy. The role new media play in citizen-policymaker relationships might gradually become more important as people increasingly use new media to transmit information and promote activism.

This study investigates the role new media play in public policy. The focus of the study is to explain how new media have facilitated public participation in policymaking. Public participation¹ is undoubtedly an important mechanism vis-à-vis policymaking. Rowe and Frewer (2004, 514) note that governments and other public agencies have increasingly sought direct public participation, as opposed to the traditional approach in

¹ This study uses “citizen participation” and “public participation” interchangeably.

which policy makers are appointed periodically. Public policy researchers have increasingly paid more attention to the impact new media have had on public participation. In the past ten years, the internet and other new forms of communication have gradually been more influential in political participation. Some researchers were quite hesitant about the role of new media in society even at the end of the 1990s. For instance, Kraut et al (1998, 1028) posited that the use of the internet negatively affects people's social involvement, resulting in declines in the size of their social circle. This argument might only be partly true as the use of the internet, particularly online social networks, in fact increases the size of a person's social circle. According to Bimber (1998, 159-160), several people have overlooked the role of technology in politics assigning equal importance to the internet by juxtaposing it against other more conventional methods such as face-to-face communication or communication through traditional media. However, Bimber (1998, 160), mentioned that although new media are not similar to traditional media, the internet can increase the speed of communication and facilitate communication with fewer intermediaries.

Governments can use the internet to interact more with the public. New media applications are fast and cost-effective. Some studies done after 2000 view new forms of media positively, and consider the internet's ability to increase interactions between the public and policymakers. For example, Stanley and Weare (2004) challenge the studies that failed to prove the internet's ability to mobilize people. They claim that "extending opportunities for participation can attract new voices, thereby changing decision makers' information environment (Stanley and Weare 2004, 503)." Governments and political activists use the internet increasingly in their activities. Ferber et al (2005) evaluated the

interactivity of state legislature websites in the United States. While Ferber et al (2005, 85) mention that many state legislature websites are not very interactive, states attempt to direct their websites toward motivating public engagement than promoting interactivity. Governments should play an active role in developing electronic platforms to interact with the public. There is another side of the new media use. While official websites provide communication platforms for state agencies, citizens also use Facebook, Twitter, blogs and e-mail to interact among each other, and with policymakers. It is important to understand how both these aspects facilitate public engagement in order to increase future public participation.

The need for a study that examines how new media contribute to organizing public participation arises because of a few reasons. The vast majority of previous work has been conducted with a more technology-based perspective, and has mostly focused on the impact of the internet on public behavior. New media are not only technical applications. In this study, I extend the analysis of new media by identifying it as a phenomenon containing a set of complex social processes. During these social processes people find new ways to use new media applications. Stober (2004) supports this argument. According to Stober (2004, 483), media emerge from a two-stage process: invention and the social institutionalizing. Technical inventions arise as improvements of old media, and these inventions are fundamentally changed by the process of social institutionalizing (Stober 2004, 483). Media play a crucial role in politics. Studies have shown that society can adopt new media to deal with political issues (e.g. Davis 2009, Bucy and Gregson 2001). New media acquired a political dimension when people began use various modalities (such as e-mail or blogging specifically) to deal with these issues.

New media might be at the forefront of political processes, potentially providing more people supplementary space to organize themselves. Existing studies do not sufficiently explain how activists and policymakers use current new media applications in policy processes. So, this study will examine new media's ability to provide a platform for political activism and will examine how society institutionalizes current new media applications.

Public participation² is arguably more issue-oriented than technology-driven. Citizens may not contribute to policy decisions if policy issues are not relevant to them. This might be the case although they have technology to organize campaigns to rally support or opposition. One way to uncover new media's potential to serve as a platform for organizing the public is to analyze their behavior in a policy debate that has mobilized a considerable degree of new media activism and public participation. There is also a need for literature that explain how new media tools like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr and blogs can encourage (or perhaps conversely, discourage) public participation. New media applications like Facebook and Twitter are acquiring important roles among people today. Accordingly, there is a need for studies that examine the role of these new media tools in public participation with respect to a current policy issue or a debate. Such a study could focus on the extent to which people adopt those tools to participate in debates, raise issues, and actively contribute to policymaking. Consequently, this study examines the role new media play in public policy with reference to proposed legislation in Hawaii in 2010, HB444/ SB 232, also known as the Civil Unions Bill. This legislation

² For this study, public participation involves consulting, involving and informing the public through procedures that give them the opportunity to provide input in policymaking processes.

proposed extending the same rights, benefits, protections, and responsibilities of spouses in a marriage to partners in a Civil Union in the State of Hawaii.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical background covers several areas that are important to develop the research approach. First, I define new media, and discuss functions of new media in the context of public policy. Then, I discuss the literature that supports the arguments that new media cause changes in constituency, provide space to create issue-oriented media forums and increase public participation in policymaking. The focus of this research is to examine these areas in the context of the Civil Unions debate in Hawaii.

Defining New Media

Seeking a comprehensive definition of new media is elusive at best. One might understand new media as a set of technical applications. However, it is difficult to select a set of “new” technical devices because the meaning of the term “new” is context dependent. For example, e-mail may not be new anymore in one country, while it might be new in another. Similarly, mobile phones may not be new in many countries. New uses of existing technology may assign new values to current media tools. For example, one might find a new mobile phone application that can provide people new benefits. Accordingly, one way to identify new media is to understand the context in which new media is studied.

New media are context dependent. Factors such as time and context are always important in deciding whether a media application is new or not. Peters (2009) examines new media history, focusing on their renewable nature. His explanations are important for

this study because they provide the theoretical foundation to frame an examination of a set of new media tools. This paragraph summarizes some of his arguments. New media are “emerging communication and information technologies undergoing a historical process of contestation, negotiation and institutionalization (18).” Most modern media go through five periods: technical invention, cultural innovation, legal regulation, economic distribution, and social mainstream (18). As mentioned before, “new media” is a relative concept. Media applications that were considered new in the 1990s may not be new anymore. Therefore, it is difficult to identify a specific set of new media applications. “[T]he concept of ‘new media’ cannot refer to any particular set of technologies: the term must sustain fascination across time and space divisions, history and social groups (17).” Similarly, I argue that researchers should select new media tools that are considered new in a given context when conducting new media research.

New media are increasingly entering politics. For instance, many people use Facebook and Twitter in their political activities. In the beginning, these two applications were considered “friendship networks.” Davis and Owen (1998, 7) note that, “[n]ew media are mass communication forms with primarily nonpolitical origins that have acquired political roles. These roles need not be largely political in nature; in some instances they are only tangentially so.” This idea is also important for this study because it raises the need to identify mass communication tools that have currently acquired political roles. The above discussion provides a basis to identify new media for this study. Accordingly, a set of new technical devices that are acquiring political roles is the definition of “new media” used in this study.

For this study, new media include websites, blogs, online social networks (Facebook and Twitter), e-mail, smart phone applications and Personal Digital Assistants (PDA). However, e-mail, and regular websites may not be new anymore in the United States. This does not mean that these new media applications should be excluded completely in my analysis. New media tools are connected to each other and are highly interactive. Therefore, an analysis of any particular new media application should also include how it interacts with other tools. In this study, my aim is also to understand the role played by the main new media applications which have begun playing a crucial role today. Facebook, Twitter, and other online social networks are increasingly acquiring significant political roles. Therefore, this study pays attention to web-based social networks and their interaction with blogs, websites and e-mail.

Functions of New Media

Many features unique to new media raise the need for a study that examines the role new media play in public participation in policymaking. Users can post and comment on posts on their Facebook walls. They can send instant messages via Twitter. They can also chat, and send Twitter feeds via Facebook. People can easily create blogs using websites such as wordpress.com, and they can create “vlogs” (video blogs) using YouTube. These tools can be connected with each other. Any person with internet access can use these facilities. The availability of these applications helps create “citizen-based media” that educate people and promote dialogue among citizens. This, I will argue, results in more public engagement. Several authors describe the functions of current new media. Davis (1999, 20) notes that the internet is expected to perform functions such as educating people, promoting public participation, assessing public opinion, and providing

a public forum. Davis and Owen (1998, 7) also mention that new media have a high potential to perform functions such as facilitating dialogue among citizens, and promoting public participation. Current new media applications, particularly online social networks are highly interactive. Users can contribute to discussions and join activities organized through new media. Therefore, these new media tools have a huge potential to promote public engagement. According to Davis and Owen (1998, 7), new media “provide mass audiences with a seemingly boundless array of sources that transcend the time and space constraints of traditional media.” Although new media may perform multiple functions, the way each new media tool functions is different from each other. For example, online social networks are different from blogs, other websites and e-mail. Even Facebook and Twitter are different from each other. Twitter is mainly used to send short feeds while Facebook provides more facilities. This raises the need of a study that explains how these new media tools work to facilitate public participation- a topic on which this study sheds light.

New media are different from traditional media. Differences between new and traditional media also raise the need for a study that explains the role of new media in public policy. Traditional media are more institutional and governed by the standards of the profession of journalism. New media are subjective. The contents and the purposes of new media tools depend on administrators or users. For instance, the administrator of a Facebook group can openly lobby for policy changes he or she prefers. He can use information as he wishes. He can mention names freely. There is almost no censorship in Facebook. As Davis and Owen (1998, 17) note, one characteristic of new media is their “anti-institutional bias.” This idea is only partly true. Web pages and other new media

forums maintained by organizations may be institutionally biased. New media forums created by individual users may (or may not) have anti-institutional biases. New media provide the freedom for individual users (including readers) to play an active role. Giving individuals voice or agency results in new media forums being better platforms for political discussions and change. This study discusses new media's ability to offer a public forum which facilitates a dialogue on an issue and provides a mechanism for citizens to organize themselves for participation in policy decisions.

New Media and Changes in Constituency

New media motivate citizens to actively contribute to policy discussions and participate in policymaking. Social networks like Facebook may particularly be able to mobilize citizens because Facebook users can post information on their friends' Facebook walls any time. With Twitter, people can send short messages instantly to a large number of people. These features assist motivating active citizens and mobilizing inactive citizens. Bruce Bimber (1999, 409) explains that technology can be influential in activating citizens' communication with government, and it can also affect the frequency or intensity of communication among active citizens. Moreover, Bimber (1999, 425) claims that the internet use has a significant impact on the profile of citizens communicating with government offices. Stimulating interest among new citizens vis-à-vis participating in policy decisions is one important effect of the internet. Research conducted by Stanley and Weare (2004, 517-520) provide empirical evidence that confirm the internet's potential to attract new people to participate in politics. According to Stanley and Weare (2004, 521), "the internet's impact on opening up issue networks to new voices and interests may have a greater influence on political participation than its

impact on changing individual motivations or capabilities.” This observation also supports the idea that the effect of new media can be looked at from two perspectives: new media’s impact on current participants, and its ability to attract new people to participate in policy making.

New media go beyond the boundaries of traditional media, transforming readers to writers by allowing them to post comments. When readers log on and make comments, the information in the forum increases. This effect could be called the information “snowball effect” of new media. In other words, in a new media forum, information expands in a multitude of dimensions as readers contribute. This is a step towards participation, because people begin to actively engage in issue-related discussions when they start commenting on issues. Ito (2008, 3) notes that, with the emergence of the internet, “[p]ublics can be reactors, (re)markers, and (re)distributors, engaging in shared culture and knowledge through discourse and social exchange as well as through acts of media reception.” Readers’ discussions are becoming important for news websites, blogs, and online social networks. Moreover, managers of news sites and other websites seem to think that readers also can play an important role in publishing their news. For example, many news articles provide “share” buttons so that readers can recommend those articles to their Facebook friends. Many news sites provide the facility for users to tweet the article. Davis (2009, 19) describes that most bloggers allow and receive comments on their posts, and comments of blog readers constitute a substantial space on a blog. These facilities give citizens (readers of new media) roles to play in politics. However, existing literature do not sufficiently explain the extent to which they have influence on policy.

One could argue that information in traditional media may not be highly subject to the “snowball” effect because traditional media are based on one way communication, rather than accumulating information from both readers and administrators.

Administrators of new media forums sometimes go beyond traditional functions such as educating people. For example, Davis (2009, 80) notes that bloggers go ahead of the function of reinforcement and attempt to promote activism among readers. A possible end-result of this process could be called “Reader-to- Activist Transition Effect.” Davis (2009, 68) explains that while personal expression and sharing experiences are the primary motives of bloggers, they also seek to share practical knowledge, change public opinion, and promote activism among readers. The interactive nature of current new media provides a good platform for activists to work closely with people. One could argue, on this basis, that increased interactions would result in readers joining the activism of administrators of new media forums. Traditional media could also function in the same way as they might also be influential in transforming a non-activist to an activist. However, it is possible that interactivity of new media makes this effect faster and more visible than traditional media.

Issue-Oriented Media Platforms

This study also explores new media’s ability to provide the space for “issue-oriented new media platforms” that perform multiple functions in stimulating public participation in policy making. Most traditional media have long term objectives. The vast majority of them cover a broad range of issues. New media forums can be shaped specifically to

target single issues, such as a particular piece of legislation³. According to Stober (2004, 504), “[a]t first, various people made a smaller or greater number of inventions or discoveries. After that, society discovered that the new technology was not only an improvement of an old medium, but could be used for new purposes and forms of communication.” While inventors of applications like Facebook and Twitter may not have had political purposes when they founded them, it is the members of society who use their inventions for political purposes. This study explores how new media can provide a platform for people to create issue-oriented media platforms (forums), attract those who are interested in the issue, and interact more with policy makers. These activities can be considered examples of the social institutionalization of today’s new media which in turn impacts public participation.

New Media and Public Participation

The rise of new media activism is an important development for public participation as it may increase public-policymaker interactions. Public-policymaker interactions can take place at different levels. For example, at the formal level, people can communicate with the Legislature. Moreover, they can communicate with legislators individually. One way to look at the impact of technology on public participation is that the internet provides the space for “e-participation.” For instance, the State of Hawaii allows the public to submit testimonies online.⁴ Another way to explain new media’s effect is that the internet might increase informal communication between policymakers and their constituents. For example, citizens can send e-mails to their legislators.

³ For instance, “Support Hawai’i Civil Unions” is a Facebook group which was created focusing only on the Civil Unions Bill in Hawaii.

⁴ The State of Hawaii submits hearing notices by e-mail to citizens and provides the facility to submit their testimonies online. See <http://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/emailtestimony/> for more details.

However, it is not clear whether one could consider informal communications between citizens and legislators public participation. This raises the need to define public participation. Rowe and Frewer (2004, 512) define public participation as “the practice of consulting and involving members of the public in the agenda-setting, decision-making, and policy-forming activities of organizations or institutions responsible for policy development.” Similarly, Laurian and Shaw (2008, 294) view public participation as, “a mode of relationship between the state and civil society that involves the public in decision making.” Although scholars have defined public participation in different contexts, input from the public has been the core of the concept of public participation. Participatory mechanisms vary widely in form and objective ranging from formal to informal practices. According to Rowe and Frewer (2000, 7), participation methods range from techniques like public opinion surveys to citizens’ juries, and the purposes of these techniques range from gathering public input in the form of opinions to obtaining judgments and decisions to make policies. Rowe and Frewer (2000, 8-9) identified eight formal public participation methods: referenda, public hearings/ inquiries, public opinion surveys, negotiated rulemaking, consensus conference, citizen jury/ panel, citizen/public advisory committee, and focus groups.

Policymakers obtain public input for many purposes. Using public input, they can discover an issue, understand people’s opinions about an issue or make policy decisions to address an issue. New media can help policymakers to achieve these objectives. Walters et al (2000, 356) presents a matrix (the Purpose-Issue Matrix) that relates the purpose of participation to the nature of the issue. This matrix shows that the purpose of techniques like internet chat and bulletin board is to discover issues, while public

hearings, referendums and elections are used to legitimize (Walters et al 2000, 356).

Public participation is different from political participation. As Laurian and Shaw (2008, 294) explain, public participation excludes traditional practices like voting and “extralegal” methods like strikes. New media have the ability to influence public participation by providing a platform for people to organize themselves for participation. New media can also serve as direct means to communicate with legislators. However, empirical studies need to explain in detail the role new media play in policy debates.

Public hearings were the main formal public participation method relating to the Civil Unions Bill in Hawaii. Many citizens submitted testimonies or petitions electronically that were used to make policy decisions. Some citizens testified orally. These activities are given the first place as public participation in this study. Testimonies submitted via e-mail are considered public participation mainly because other new media tools like Facebook, Twitter and websites can be used to promote the submission electronically. This research analyzes the role Facebook played in motivating people to submit testimony. Petitions are also considered participation because the list of testimonies in the State Legislature web site includes petitions. Any other instance in which citizens have served as groups or worked individually to provide input to make decisions related to HB 444/ SB 232 will be considered participation.

One main characteristic that makes new media different from traditional media is that it lacks centralized control. There are many players in the new media space. The internet has provided citizens the opportunity to communicate easily. Ito (2008, 3) notes that “now publics are communicating more and more through complex networks that are bottom-up, top-down, as well as side to side.” For instance, the “blogosphere” which is

the space created from blogs in the internet seems to have gained increased popularity among people. Many people start their writing career with blogs. According to Woodly (2008, 122), “[b]log readers are able to contribute to dialogue with amateur authors that they have *made* legitimate and influential by and through their sustained readership. Their comments, voluntary research, and specialized knowledge may all be partially constitutive of the news they consume—news that is also consumed by opinion and policy makers about whom they make political decisions.” Higher interactivity, which could be considered the most distinctive feature of new media, encourages people to engage more in conversation, making comments, or even creating their own forums relating to a particular issue. This has blurred the boundaries between media, other parties and the public in the new media environment. Delivery of information has become faster, and the circulation of information has increased. This nature of new media has motivated people to emerge as free writers and assume leadership roles in society. Organizations also have the ability to comment, create forums, and transmit information related to policy issues. New media writers or journalists, breaking the media-public sector-the public triangle, have emerged as another important segment in new media. This study examines this segment and looks at how new media is used in relation to political activism and how legislators are affected by their activism.

Research Problem and the Question

This study analyzes, in detail, how new media have facilitated public participation in the policy process of the Civil Unions Bill. The intent of HB444/ SB 232 was to establish Civil Unions in Hawaii. This measure was expected to extend the same rights, benefits, protections, and responsibilities of spouses in a marriage to partners in a Civil

Union. I select the case study approach based on the argument that issue-based online activism plays an important role in public policy, and people may be more attentive on highly contested debates. Researchers cannot use any policy debate to study the new media- public policy link. This study argues that two criteria can be used to decide whether a particular case is a reasonable example to investigate the new media- public participation link. First, there should be a considerable degree of public participation relating to the issue. Second, the issue should have inspired a sufficient level of activism in new media. A case that satisfies these two criteria can provide a solid basis to analyze how new media can affect participation. The Civil Unions Bill satisfies these criteria. Therefore, the Civil Unions Bill constitutes a very good instance to examine new media usage and public participation. The Hawaii State Legislature passed many important bills during the regular 2010 session. Some examples of areas those bills are related to are firearms, pollution, procurement, motor vehicle industry licensing, limiting civil liability, motor vehicle express warranty enforcement, water, civil defense, electric guns, and fireworks. Although these issues were of great public importance, it is observed that the levels of new media activism in relation to these bills were not as substantial as the Civil Unions Bill.

Civil Unions are hotly contested and debated in the United States, and new media have been the foundation for many activities relating to the discussion⁵. There are several active Facebook groups that make their members aware of the current status of the issue and suggest courses of action. Most of these forums have a significant number of

⁵ Some examples of Facebook pages on civil unions in some states are; Preserve Traditional Marriage and the Natural Family in Vermont, HRC In Connecticut, Help Keep Gay Marriage Legal in Connecticut, Support Gay Marriage In Delaware Now!!, Legalization for Gay Marriage In The U.S., Support Equal Rights in Kansas, Talk About Equality, Preserving the Divine Institution of Marriage, and Utahns against Prop 8.

members⁶. New media played an active role since the introduction of HB 444 in Hawaii. Activists, through various platforms, provided updates on the bill and suggested people stay connected with the issue. The Facebook forum “Support HB444” which has more than 550 members educated their constituency on how they can stay “connected,” and provided a broad idea regarding what they should do. This Facebook group also provided the following information to viewers which clearly show they operate well in the new media environment:

“Ok Supporters, we are going viral with Technology, to let the legislators know that we are here, and they need to know, this needs to pass this session. We are posting on Twitter so follow civilunionsHI and get the latest from the capitol and what to do. If you don't have twitter, go to twitter.com, sign up its free and follow civilunionsHI so you have the latest and greatest (Support HB 444, 2011).”

New media activists suggested to their audience actions to take during the process, and attempted to get the public involved in some sort of activism. Pride Alliance Hawaii, for example, suggested the following four things the public can do for equality by the 4th of July, 2010, two days before the Hawaii Governor vetoed the Bill;

1. “Call Governor Lingle: (808) 586-0034 or (808) 586-0222. Register your support for HB 444.
2. E-mail Governor Lingle using Equality Hawaii’s Action Alert: Go to Equality Hawaii’s website at www.equalityhawaii.com and click on the orange “Act Now” button. Explain why passing HB 444 is important to you.

⁶ For instance, “Talk About Equality” interacts with more than four thousand members.

3. Get 3 Friends or Family Members to Call or Email the Governor: “My (sister/cousin/friend) lives in Hawaii and would benefit from the...
4. Join Pride Alliance Hawaii’s Capitol Sign Waving & First Friday Chinatown March. Friday July 2: Sign Waving 4-6 pm at Hawaii State Capitol; Chinatown March 6-7 pm. Go to pridealliancehawaii.com and click on the “FaceBook page” link for more info and updates (Pride Alliance Hawaii 2011).”

The following is a post in the discussion board of the Facebook page of Support Hawaii Civil Unions which had more than 1200 members by July 2010. This is another example of how activists used new media to inspire public participation.

“Get involved in individual elections. Run in individual elections. Testify before the Legislature. Write letters to the editor. Submit written testimony. Get acquainted with the service of the Access Room, at Hawaii Capitol Building, 4th Floor. Support Access' supplemental budget requests. Visit your individual district lawmakers. Speak to authority. Talk to your strength. Above all, avoid preaching to the choir (Support Hawaii Civil Unions 2011).”

One central aspect of new media activism is that the internet provides space for ordinary citizens to engage in discussions with other interested parties. Rather than the administrators solely providing information and suggestions about the Bill, members can also make suggestions which immediately become information that others can access in the forums. Rodman (2003, 28) articulates, “[n]ot only does the Net give relatively ordinary people access to a seemingly endless wealth or information from a diverse range of sources, but it also provides them with the unprecedented ability to package and

distribute their own ideas to a global audience.” Readers’ comments can be seen in many new media forums relating to the Civil Unions debate. In July 2010, Governor Linda Lingle of the State of Hawaii vetoed the Civil Unions Bill. This was a critical juncture in the process which increased public attention on the bill, causing changes in new media activities. After the veto, new media campaigns started rallying against the Governor’s decision. These groups worked with a long term focus. Some of these social forums started supporting candidates running in the State elections who supported Civil Unions in Hawaii. For instance, Equality Hawaii issued a “voter guide,” endorsing the candidate Neil Abercrombie for governor and supporting some other candidates who ran for other positions (Equality Hawaii 2010). This guide mentioned that these candidates support obtaining equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Public participation was high in relation to this bill. Many individuals and groups arguing against, as well as supporting the bill submitted testimony and participated in public hearings. The *Hawaii Reporter* stated that one Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on the Civil Unions Bill lasted for 18hours. The *Hawaii Reporter* mentions that, since statehood, it was the longest single public hearing in Hawaii’s history. In many previous cases, testifying has been limited to professionals and organizations concerned about the issue. The large number of citizens who signed written testimony and petitions, and the number of individuals who participated in hearings show that Civil Unions issue provides solid grounding from which to investigate public participation. Accordingly, the Civil Unions Bill fulfills both requirements highlighted above: (1) there should be a considerable degree of public participation on the issue, and (2) the issue should have inspired a sufficient level of activism in new media. Therefore, the Civil Unions issue

provides the opportunity for a study to investigate the new media- public participation link. There is some evidence in the testimony that there could be a new media effect on participation. One example is that most of the testimony has been submitted online or through e-mail. Some citizens sent testimony using their iPhones (Hawaii State Legislature 2010). This evidence shows that there is a technology- savvy segment of the constituency, and there might be a possibility that they have used, and been influenced by new media in their activities. Similarly, this study contributes to literature on new media by answering the following question:

What role did new media play in policy making with respect to the Civil Unions Bill in the State of Hawaii?

One possible answer to the main research question is that new media contributed to an increase in public participation in relation to the Civil Unions Bill. This answer can be supported from many perspectives. Groups of activists who create and maintain new media forums, and organize people for participation are an important (but not the only) segment to study. As explained above, new media can transform any individual or a group of individuals to “forum administrators.” For instance, Davis (2009, 40) identifies college professors, lawyers, journalists and political consultants among top bloggers. This implies that professors, lawyers, and political consultants have become “journalists” in the blogosphere. New media can create journalists or “media groups” quickly in the virtual environment⁷. Moreover, this process is cost-effective, and involves less legal and administrative tasks compared to traditional media. This group of new “journalists” is given attention in this study.

⁷ For example, “Support HB 444” is Facebook group created specifically to support civil unions in Hawaii.

The extent to which a citizen is engaged in politics is important in deciding whether new media brings in new citizen participants. Stanley and Weare (2004, 519) highlight the importance of previous political activities of participants. Although their web discussion attracted some individuals, they could not conclusively decide whether web-based discussions attracted inactive citizens as opposed to already active individuals since they did not have data on previous political activities of participants (Stanley and Weare 2004, 519). This provides one important guideline for my research. That is, previous levels of participation need to be compared with current participation in order to conclude that changes in technology have had an impact on participation. However, this study does not gather data from the Facebook users. Legislators might have a fair understanding about the changes in public participation over a particular period of time. Those legislators who played a role in this bill and other bills, especially the bills that were discussed in the “pre-Facebook” period might be able to provide important insights into how participation has changed over time. Therefore, the study also examines the opinions of legislators involved with the Civil Unions Bill in Hawaii.

Objective of the Study

The main proposition of this study is that new media serves as a platform for the public to organize themselves to participate in the policymaking process. In the new media environment, people are constantly connected to new media, more aware of issues, and actively engaged with policy related discussions. The state of Hawaii has strong social media that provides a good background for the public to participate in policymaking. Newspapers, television stations, and many other organizations have a strong presence in new media. The State Legislature website itself functions well in

providing information to the public. Ferber et al (2005, 89) rank the web site of the Legislature of the State of Hawaii number one in the United States in terms of interactivity. They assessed legislature web sites based on five components: content, usability, interactivity, transparency and audience (Feber et al 2005, 88). As in any other metropolitan area in the United States, the internet has become one important mode of communication for citizens in Honolulu. Thus, in Hawaii, new media might influence public participation in policy making by making people aware of the issues and increasing activism among the public. The main objective of this research is to examine the role of new media in public policy with reference to the Civil Union Bill (HB 444/ SB 232) proposed in the State of Hawaii. The study attempts to develop understanding about this issue by exploring how citizens organized the public to influence policy making, and how legislators have used new media with reference to the Civil Union Bill.

Method

The main factor in deciding the methodology for the study is that existing literature does not sufficiently identify variables to conduct a conclusive study on the role of new media on public participation. Particularly, there is a lack of studies that approach new media based on social networks. This raises the need for a more descriptive study that lays the foundation for further studies. Given the importance of inputs from administrators of new media forums⁸ and legislators, this study is designed as an exploratory study among these two groups.

⁸ This group is sometimes referred to as “activists” or “new media activists” in this research.

Data Collection

Since social networks are considered at the center of the discussion on today's new media, the selection of respondents representing these networks was done using Facebook. The selection of Facebook as the entry point for data collection does not exclude the views of those who use other social networks (e.g. Twitter) and new media tools since most of these tools are connected to each other. Administrators of six Facebook groups that focus on influencing the decision of the Civil Union Bill were chosen for interviews. Those groups were: Equality Hawaii, Pride Alliance Hawaii, Courting Equality, Support Hawaii Civil Unions, Support HB 444, and Protect the Sanctity of Marriage in Hawai'i. These groups were chosen purposefully based on three criteria; number of members, level of activism, and representation of both sides of the issue. These Facebook groups altogether have more than 4,000 members. Support Hawaii Civil Unions, Support HB 444, Courting Equality, Support Hawaii Civil Unions and Pride Alliance Hawaii supported the bill while Protect the Sanctity of Marriage in Hawaii opposed the bill. I contacted the administrators of these groups to request interviews, and 10 of these administrators were interviewed during the data collection process. The profile of respondents was diverse and included 1 activist in the age group 60-80 years, 4 in the age group 40-60 years, and 5 in the age group 20-40 years. The sample did not include professional journalists, and all the interviewees were employees, employers or students. The average time per interview with these Facebook group administrators was 50 minutes.

Legislators were chosen to represent the views of those who proposed the bill, supported the bill, opposed the bill and held hearings. From the 10 legislators selected, 7

were interviewed. The legislators interviewed included 3 senators representing the Judiciary Committee to which the bill was referred, and 1 representative who was actively involved with the bill. The average time per interview with legislators was 40 minutes. Semi-structured interviews, with the use of two interview guides, were conducted to collect data from respondents. Semi-structured interviews are flexible in that the interviewer can modify the order of question and the details of how the intended information is covered. This technique provided the flexibility for the interviewer to adapt to each situation, and to the perspectives of the main groups of respondents of the study. The interviews were conducted to identify the role new media played in each respondent's activities related to public participation in the Civil Unions Bill. The meaning of new media and the focus of the study were explained to the respondents before the interviews since it was possible that the interviewees would focus on the Civil Unions debate rather than the role social media played in their work on the bill. Follow up questions were asked whenever necessary, and clarification was made when respondents needed further information about the questions asked.

Two interview guides were developed based on the literature discussed above. Interviewees were given a copy of the interview guides before the interviews. An interview guide was used for interviews with administrators of new media forums and included seventeen questions. These questions were developed to obtain respondents' ideas on four main dimensions: functions of new media, constituency, reader-to-activist transition, and the rise of issue oriented new media platforms. The following questions were included in the Interview Guide I:

- I. Do you have previous experience participating in political activity, or trying to influence policy decisions? Could you briefly tell me about them?
- II. In those activities, did you use new media?
- III. What led you to use new media to organize people to participate in policymaking related to the Civil Unions Bill?
- IV. New media can be used for many purposes such as making members aware, coordinate the activities, strengthen or change the opinions.

With respect to the Civil Unions Bill, were there particular purposes for which you wanted to use new media?
- V. Are there specific features about new media that enable you to accomplish your purposes?
- VI. Have you used other (“old media”) communications tools (letters, phone calls) with respect to the Civil Unions Bill? If so, how would you compare those means of communication with social media? (more or less effective? More or less efficient? Other?)
- VII. How would you profile the members of your social media forum in terms of age, gender, education, and profession?
- VIII. What differences do you see between participants (activists) of the Civil Union issue who use and do not use new media?

- IX. Do those participants who use new media have special advantages which others do not have?
- X. Do you have a sense of the number of members of your forum who were participating in influencing policy decisions for the first time?
- XI. If you only use social media, what types of citizens (activists) do you think you miss? What are the reasons?
- XII. What roles do members of your social media forum play? Are they mere readers or do they engage in commenting, providing more information, and distributing your messages to others? Do you have a sense of what percentage of forum members were active as opposed to merely reading information?
- XIII. Do new media provide you particular methods of encouraging active public participation? What features of new media support you the most to create active members?
- XIV. To what extent do you think your forum was able to motivate regular members (mere readers) to actively participate in the Civil Union Bill process?
- XV. When did you create the forum on the Civil Unions Bill? How long do you expect to maintain the forum? What are the reasons?
- XVI. If you were to use new media again in a political activity, what would you do differently (if anything)?

- XVII. Do you expect to work with current members in future bills other than the Civil Unions Bill? If not, what are the reasons?

Interview Guide II was designed for legislators involved in the civil unions legislation in Hawaii. The questions asked of legislators were directed at three main areas: legislators' familiarity with new media applications, perceived effect of new media on citizen-policy maker interactions, and the impact of new media on decisions made by legislators. Interview Guide II included following fifteen questions:

- I. How long have you been involved with politics or in influencing public policy?
- II. How would you compare the profiles of legislators who use, and who do not use, new media (for example, by age, gender and education)?
- III. What policy related challenges do legislators face with the emergence of new media?
- IV. In addition to traditional forms of communication with citizens or interest groups, what forms of "new media" communication tools does your office use (your own website, Facebook, Twitter, etc.)?
- V. Has the profile of citizen participants changed over time? In what ways?
- VI. In your view, have the ways legislators obtain input from the public for policy making changed appreciably over the last 10 years? How significant has new media been in these changes?
- VII. How do you think new media has impacted communication between legislators and citizens? For example, has it been able to bring peoples' suggestions faster, or earlier in the process, than before? If yes, what specific

new media tools have been most effective in this function?

- VIII. What was your role in the Civil Unions Bill?
- IX. Have you used new media with respect to your work on the Civil Unions Bill?
If yes, how?
- X. Did using new media on the Civil Unions bill affect the decision making process in particular ways?
- XI. What specific forms of new media (Ex: Facebook, Twitter, web sites, blogs) have been most influential in relation to the Civil Unions Bill? What do you think might be reasons for those media tools to be more influential than others?
- XII. Are you aware of the new media groups/forums that rally support either for or against the Civil Unions Bill? If so, how influential are those groups in your decisions related to the Bill?
- XIII. Were there particular activities by these groups that you found especially effective?
- XIV. Do you see new media changing the nature of political activity and policy-making in the future? In what ways might this occur?

Data Analysis

Data analysis was primarily qualitative; focusing on answering the main research question. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The transcripts were used to code data and categorize them to identify the themes emerging from interviews. To explain the themes emerging, similar responses are put together, and whenever there is a different argument, it is reported separately. After categorizing, the data is listed under

subtitles for analysis. Themes emerging under each subtitle are explained in detail using direct quotes from interviews as examples. Ideas of new media activists and legislators are analyzed separately, and whenever relevant, similarities and differences in the new media use of these two groups are explained.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is two-fold. On the one hand, this research explains how the administrators of social media forums use new media, particularly social networks, to influence citizens. Understanding the behavior of this group in relation to a policy issue is important as this group might behave differently from traditional journalists. The study reveals the administrators' perception of how members of new media groups react to the messages distributed by them, and how these members influence policy making. On the other hand, this study explains how legislators view new media, their attitudes towards the changing nature of public participation, provides examples of how lawmakers adjust to the changing media environment, and explores legislators' awareness of activism in the new media environment.

New media is a time-related phenomenon. Tools that are considered new media today might be listed under traditional media tomorrow. This study is important as it explains how today's new media facilitates civic engagement. Information and communications technology changes rapidly. Therefore, scholars need to continuously explain the changing nature of new media and how it influences policy processes. This study contributes to the literature by providing the examples of new media use in one of the most debated issues in the legislative history of the State of Hawaii.

CHAPTER 2: RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter discusses literature that helps strengthen the theoretical framework discussed in Chapter I. Understanding today's new media should start with the internet, as it is the broad platform on which different new media tools function. New media originate and function from within the internet. Therefore, it is important for a new media study to understand how researchers explain the role of the internet in politics. This chapter explains first how scholars see the ability of the internet to change political processes. The literature review starts with a discussion about how the internet changes the public sphere. Then I discuss how new media can help reduce weaknesses or improve the process of public participation. Applications like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and blogs have contributed to create the current new media space. Facebook and Twitter seem to have reached millions of people. According to the Facebook Statistics (2011), there are more than 500 million active users on Facebook, and more than 200 million of them access Facebook through mobile devices. It is important to understand how these social networks change the way people interact with each other. I discuss literature related to the role of online social networks to support the position that those networks should be given attention in current new media studies.

The Internet and the Changing Nature of Politics

The internet has an enormous potential to improve political activities at the grass-roots level. People may not be able to engage in politics due to many reasons. One may not have enough time to join political activities. Another may not have enough

information about political issues. Moreover, people may not be aware of grass-roots level political activities. The internet not only provides people information on policy issues, but also helps dispersed individuals to work as groups. The internet's ability to connect people with each other increases the internet's popularity as a tool for political activities. Some scholars argue that the internet causes a radical transformation in politics. One way to look at this transformation is to study how the emergence of the internet influences traditional interest group politics. Richard Davis (1999, 62) pays attention to internet-based groups, and notes, "[t]he emergence of these new groups on a medium that defies structure and invites individual participation could be viewed as the beginning of the end for interest group politics as we know it." Davis (1999, 63) explains that traditional political practices will change with the rise of internet politics, making large groups that dominate American politics anachronistic. The internet either creates virtual groups or help individuals to work directly with legislators or public agencies. According to Davis (1999, 63), the future of American politics will be characterized by citizens who do not need groups any more. The transition from the television age to the cyber age is a significant step in media history. People's use of various internet applications may result in changes in their political activities. Researchers need to study how these changes affect policymaking processes.

Formation of issue-based groups is an important aspect of new media activism. One main function of current new media is that they constantly provide information about various political issues. Once a person begins to follow a certain issue, he can access updates about the issue anytime. This may keep him connected to the issue. Some scholars explain that the internet causes a shift in interest group politics toward issue

based politics. For example, Bruce Bimber (1998) argues that a model of accelerated pluralism is likely to describe those effects. The notion of accelerated pluralism suggests that, “the Internet contributes to the on-going fragmentation of the present system of interest-based group politics and a shift toward a more fluid, issue-based group politics with less institutional coherence (Bimber 1998, 133).” Bimber (1998, 136) claims that the internet does not revolutionize the structure of political power in the United States, but it accelerates the formation and actions of issue groups. There are many groups working online, focusing on many social issues. However, existing studies do not sufficiently explain the role played by internet based issue groups. Therefore, one approach to study the role of the internet in public policy is to examine how internet-based issue groups use new media applications to influence policy making processes.

To study the political impact of internet based issue groups, their behavior should be studied in the context of a current policy debate. As explained in the previous chapter, studies that examine the impact of the internet use on civic engagement provide mixed results. Some researchers mention that there is no evidence to prove the internet’s impact on public engagement. For example, Bruce Bimber (2001) fails to find a significant relationship between information availability and the political engagement in the United States. Issue-based politics is a better approach to examine the internet’s impact on public policy since there may be many apathetic citizens in a general sample. Public engagement is issue-driven. A person may not be interested in contributing to a policy debate if the issue is of no relevance to him. As Bimber (2001, 53) notes, “[s]ome aspects of democracy appear more sensitive than others to the availability throughout society of political information. Individual-level political engagement poses a puzzle in

this regard.” Bimber’s findings (1998 and 2001) are important as they provide an approach to study internet’s role among the public. They support two arguments. First, as I mentioned before, online issue-group activism is an important aspect to study in the current new media environment. Second, the role of the internet or new media in public policy needs to be investigated in the context of a current policy debate. People might pay more attention on highly contested debates. Therefore, a sensitive debate should be selected to understand how people use new media applications in their activities. These two points support the choice of the case and the groups of respondents for this study.

New Media and Public Participation

Public participation is a part of a large political process. It is a multifaceted phenomenon.⁹ Policy makers can obtain public input for many purposes. As explained in the previous chapter, one participatory exercise may focus on obtaining ideas of citizens, while the purpose of another could be obtaining a final decision from the public. Based on previous studies, Rowe and Frewer (2004, 514) explain that, in policy making, public input can be obtained in many different ways, or at different levels. There are different techniques that come under public participation. Whatever the methods used, the question of the effectiveness of public participation needs to be answered. There are many ways to approach answering this question. For example, a public participation exercise could be effective if citizen input actually contributes to policy making. Another way to assess the effectiveness of public participation is to understand costs involved with the participation

⁹ Judy Rosener (1978) asked questions of who, where, what, how, and when to explain the complex nature of the simple phrase “citizen participation.” She explained that the public participation depends on actors involved (elected officials, public administrators, and citizens), goals and objectives of participation, different kinds of issues related, stage of the policy making process at which participation is desirable.

exercise. Rowe and Frewer (2004, 517-521) explain the difficulty of defining effectiveness of public participation, emphasizing that it depends on a number of factors. Developing some criteria to assess the effectiveness and re-evaluating their validity across different contexts is one approach to examine the effectiveness of public participation accurately. Rowe and Frewer (2004, 521) argue that, “[f]requently, researchers and authors may simply discuss or forward some key aspect of effective participation, rather than a complete definition, or else may present some rule of thumb or checklist for effective participation in which the definition is implicit.” This is an important argument because, as mentioned above, policymakers may obtain public input for different purposes and at different levels. Rowe et al (2004, 93) suggest nine criteria to evaluate public participation exercises: 1) representativeness, 2) independence, 3) early involvement, 4) influence, 5) transparency, 6) resource accessibility, 7) task definition, 8) structured decision making, and 9) cost-effectiveness. These criteria can be used to evaluate whether a participation process is effective or not.

Arguably, the rise of new media is a significant development that can help increase the effectiveness of public participation. Policy makers have started using new technology to obtain input from citizens (e.g: The State of Hawaii accepts testimony online). Growing new media usage has also caused increases in interactions among citizens. This might affect the nature of public participation. One approach to frame the relationship between new media and public participation is to view new media as a set of tools that can help obtain public input easily and rapidly. New media have a great potential to address limitations of public participation. According to Irvin and Stanbury (2004, 58), time and worse policy decisions are disadvantages of civic participation for

citizens. Time, monetary costs, possibility of back fire and causing hostility toward government are disadvantages of citizen participation for governments (Irvin and Stanbury 2008, 58). New media can help avoid some of these disadvantages. For example, policymakers can use new media to reduce time spent by both citizens and policymakers on a particular participatory exercise. Moreover, hostility toward government can be reduced by using new media to educate the public about policy decisions. Similarly, if some criteria proposed by Rowe et al (2004, 93) are considered, proper use of new media can increase the effectiveness of public participation (e.g new media can be used to increase resource accessibility by providing relevant information for the public).

Participation in a policy debate is a rational choice. It requires some effort. People consider a few things when deciding whether or not to participate. Some of those include the time they have to spend, monetary costs, opinions of family and friends, and the relevance of the issue. Kathlene and Martin (1991, 48) identified three citizens' limitations in effective participation: "(1) cost/benefit payoff to individual (2) access to official and technical information," and "(3) access to critical points in the decision process." Kathlene and Martin (1991, 48) described that increasing the accessibility of relevant information, and obtaining and integrating public opinion in the formulation of policy are important steps to increase citizen efficacy in participation. New media, being interactive and cost-effective applications, have the potential to perform these functions. In other words, new media can help overcome citizens' limitations in public participation.

Public participation involves costs for both policy makers and the public. To avoid these costs, policy makers may decide not to obtain public input. Although public

participation involves some costs, many researchers argue that both expert analysis and citizens' ideas are important to make good policies. For example, Walters et al (2000, 349) claim that many policy makers avoid public participation as policy issues are complex, or participation involves costs and causes delays. Although this might be true, avoiding public input is not advisable. People can explain issues from different perspectives. They also can highlight weaknesses of proposed policy changes. According to Walters et al (2000, 357), "[f]ailing to include the public in the decision-making process deprives decision makers of valuable input and compromises legitimacy." This is where new media applications can play a crucial role. New media can facilitate dialogue between citizens and policymakers. Such a dialogue will give citizens a role to play. Bucy and Gregson (2001, 375) mention, "[i]n contrast to passive spectatorship under a one-way communication system, media participation in an interactive environment presents the citizen with a civic role and ready avenue of involvement across a variety of communication modalities." This is an important argument because interactivity is perhaps the most distinctive feature of current new media applications. Policymakers can use interactive new media applications to give citizens a role to play, and create a more open decision environment.

Although it is possible that citizens' concerns may not always be considered in policymaking, new media provide people the opportunity to voice their concerns. Some researchers see this as a progressive step. Governments use methods such as voting, public hearings, and citizen panels to obtain public input. However, some people may expect more opportunities to get involved with policy making. New media can play a crucial role in fulfilling this need. As Bucy and Gregson (2001, 377) argue, "[n]ew media

formats satisfy this need for popular involvement by delivering a continuous stream of opportunities for civic engagement without overextending the government's ability to respond." New media can increase public access to the political pressure system, increasing the possibility that citizens' concerns will be taken into consideration (Bucy and Gregson 2001, 377). However, both citizens and policymakers have duties to perform when using new media to engage the public more with policymaking. Both parties should be willing to use new technology. Both parties should have the access to, and the ability to use new media applications.

Although new media have the potential to facilitate public engagement, it is important that citizens use those new media applications actively. Although there are highly interactive media applications, it takes some time for them to have the recognition among people. For example, new media tools such as Facebook and Twitter were embraced first by the young population, particularly teenagers. It took some time for these tools to receive the kind of recognition they now enjoy among adults. As Davis (2005, 84) also confirms based on his study, compared with other online users, those who engage in online discussions are younger, more likely to be male, and unmarried. Moreover, Davis describes that online participants are less well educated and less likely to be partisans in politics (Davis 2005, 84). These findings confirm the idea that those who use the internet or new media are youngsters who are less involved with politics. However, one could argue that if young citizens use the internet more than others, they might engage politics in early stages in their lives. This argument can be true as youngsters may receive more information about political issues. Some researchers support this argument. For example, Best and Krueger (2005, 203) argue that internet

skills of youngsters should positively influence their participation. However, Best and Krueger (2005, 204) recommended that the new medium should be compared with traditional approaches when making conclusions about the political influence of young adults. Internet usage has increased tremendously during last ten years. The internet is no longer limited to one generation. Adults and even organizations use many new media applications including Facebook. Therefore, understanding the impact of the internet on youngsters is not sufficient. Researchers should also study the impact of new media on other segments of population.

Policymakers have a crucial role to play in developing new approaches for public participation. Public participation is a part of the policymaking process. Therefore, policymakers should be ready to open up the process for the public. Some public agencies may not be ready to establish electronic platforms of participation. Several researchers are skeptical about policymakers' readiness to use the internet to interact with the public. According to Bucy and Gregson (2001, 375), the direct political impact of media participation may be limited to encouraging citizens to register their opinion, since there is no guarantee that policymakers consider online discussions seriously. Similarly, although Best and Krueger (2005, 204) found that the internet can politically activate young citizens, they also mentioned that this finding may be of less significance if policymakers consider electronic participation inferior to traditional forms of participation. One message in these findings is that ideas of policy makers are important in understanding the internet's role in public participation. Policy makers need to play a leading role to improve public participation using new media tools. Some authors argue that citizens cannot control policymaking processes, and therefore, they cannot address

the weaknesses of participatory exercises. For example, according to Kathlene and Martin (1991, 49), most of the weaknesses of citizen participation are beyond the citizens' control. To quote Kathlene and Martin (1991, 49): "It is the officials who decide what type of citizen forum will be used, how much information will be provided, when in the decision process citizen participation will be elicited, and how important citizen input will be in deciding public policy." These arguments are true because policymakers are the only group that has power to formally establish mechanisms of electronic participation. Although citizens can informally contact legislators through new media, they do not have power to establish formal avenues of participation.

Why Social Networks Constitute an Important Aspect of New Media

The popularity of online social networks like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn is increasing tremendously. The role social networks play in today's new media environment has not been discussed adequately by the academic community. This gap is clearly evident with lack of scholarly work in this area of study. One reason why public policy scholars should study online social networks is that these networks might have the ability to facilitate policy-related discussions among citizens. Public discussions about various issues play a big role in their participation. Klofstad (2007) studied the relationship between public discussions about politics and civic participation, and argued that people are recruited to get involved during public discussions. Klofstad (2007, 180) suggests that discussions with peers about relevant issues reduce the costs and increase the benefits of participation. One's peers can be politically influential. According to Klofstad (2007, 180), peers provide information about how one can become active, increase his political engagement, and they openly ask individuals to join activities.

Current new media tools play a significant role, providing effective communications platforms that help people perform all three of these functions (peer influences). Online social networks are particularly helpful to create a network of friends and discuss social and political issues with them. Therefore, social networks should have the ability to increase public engagement.

New media are faster than traditional media in providing information. Moreover, they provide mechanisms for engagement. New media activists explicitly attempt to recruit activists. Moreover, new media keep citizens connected with their peers through various platforms, particularly social networks. Online social networks like Facebook and Twitter seem to be the most popular tools today that perform these functions. A person's network in Facebook is based on his social relationships. Many of Klofstad's (2007) arguments summarized above hold true in the case of Facebook. Facebook is mainly based on non-professional relationships like friendship. However, Facebook is used by many people to discuss political and social issues. It has also been the platform for many interest groups (e.g. movie fans, groups that focus on protecting environment). Facebook can facilitate group activities among dispersed people and help develop a sense of closeness. Cuonzo (2010, 175) mentions that the advent of social networks has allowed geographically divided groups to develop efficient social bonds. According to Cuonzo (2010, 175), "[j]ust as the emergence of spoken language solved the problem of increased group size among our ancestors, so the emergence of Facebook allows for bonding among not only a larger group, but a group that is increasingly dispersed in location." This is an important function for activists. They can use Facebook to manage their campaigns although their constituents are dispersed geographically.

People have their own positions towards socio-economic and political issues. Arguably, they select information sources to match their positions. This may keep them from acquiring new information that might change their positions. Bar-Tura (2010) supports this argument. Bar-Tura (2010, 238) explains that “niche consumerism of ideas” is a major problem posed by websites and blogs that focus on social justice issues. Bar-Tura (2010, 239) argues based on this idea that people look for information in websites containing news and comments that support their existing views. This argument cannot be true for social networks where people can post information from different sources. One cannot control the posts of his or her Facebook friends. Facebook is an open forum where people can post information and discuss social issues. Therefore it is possible that, in Facebook, people are exposed to information from different perspectives. According to Bar-Tura (2010, 239), users can make Facebook a public sphere where they can discuss important issues. Social networks are not only places to make friends. They are also powerful tools which activists can use. For example, facilities like “Facebook events”, “causes”, and Twitter application in Facebook increase efficiency of activists’ work.

Facebook is perhaps the most popular online social network today. It performs multiple functions. Facebook is a place where people can make friends and keep them updated. It is also a place where people can post important articles, news, videos and pictures. People can comment on those posts. Facebook is a social platform rather than a tool of communication. Briggie (2010, 163) claims that Facebook has changed the traditional idea that medium is a channel, by providing a place that functions as a medium. Facebook is “not a channel for transferring information, but an environment or a cyberspace where information lives and is made available (Briggie 201, 163).” Facebook

and other social networks are increasingly acquiring political roles. For instance, Beaumont (2011) explains that Facebook played a crucial role in uprisings in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia. New media tools are increasingly used by political activists. Therefore, public policy researchers should examine the role played by these applications in public policy.

Conclusion

The above discussion provides the background for data analysis of this research. The internet is the broad platform where different new media tools function. These tools are linked and interact with each other. They have developed to an extent that it is important to understand the behavior of each tool rather than understanding the internet as a tool. This study approaches data analysis by selecting online social media networks, mainly Facebook and Twitter as the entry point for analysis. Social networks, particularly Facebook, might be in the center of political activism as they perform multiple functions. Facebook is a gathering place of information published on blogs, websites, and messages sent from smart phones and PDAs. Facebook sends updates on new posts or invitations to e-mail. Websites and blogs provide links to Facebook and Twitter rather than bringing in information from them. Rather than being a website or blog, Facebook serves as a platform for activism.

CHAPTER 3: ORGANIZING CITIZENS THROUGH FACEBOOK:

PERSPECTIVES OF NEW MEDIA ACTIVISTS

Introduction

This chapter contains an analysis of the data obtained through interviews. The data analysis is focused on three main areas: (1) the functions of new media in the Civil Unions debate, (2) the activists' perception of their constituency and how they can motivate inactive citizens to actively participate in the policymaking process (reader-to-activist transition), and (3) the rise of issue oriented new media platforms on Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights. The results of interviews indicate three answers to the main research question (What role did new media play in policy making with respect to the Civil Unions Bill in the State of Hawaii?): (1) new media have increased activist-citizen interactions, providing superior communications solutions (as opposed to traditional methods used at the grass-roots level) to organize the public (2) activists think that new media have brought in new citizen participants, and (3) new media have provided the space to create short-term "issue oriented media platforms" relating to the Civil Unions debate in Hawaii.

According to the views of 10 Facebook group administrators, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other related tools have provided them better infrastructure (as opposed to methods such as snail mail, telephone, and flyers that they used before) to organize the public to participate in the Civil Unions policy process. Activists claim that they have been able to attract a large number of people to testify online in support of HB 444 and SB 232, and lobby in support of Civil Unions in Hawaii. However, most of them do not

have an effective feedback loop on the influence that their new media campaigns possess. The data analysis shows that issue oriented new media forums can be adaptive. During the debate, activists have created media forums that gathered and published information relating to LGBT issues. These forums have been the main platforms of their activism. Through new media applications, they sent action alerts, published new posts, and provided guidelines on how to participate. These forums, showing their adaptive nature, now focus on elevating the dialogue to obtain marriage rights for those who enter into Civil Unions, and other LGBT issues.

New Media Usage in Transition: The Example of Hawaii Civil Unions

Times have changed in Hawaii. Gone are the days when social networks, such as Facebook, were viewed as only for the young. Davis's (2005, 84) observation that new media are mainly used by youngsters is disputed by this study. From the end of the 1990s until the beginning of the 2000s, online social networks were generally considered popular only among young users. De Zuniga and Valenzuela (2010) describe that the use of online social networks is not limited to youngsters.¹⁰ This study supports De Zuniga's and Valenzuela's (2010) suggestions, and claims that even applications like Facebook and Twitter are increasingly becoming integral parts of mainstream politics. The implications of De Zuniga and Valenzuela (2010) are staggering. This shift does not just imply a change in modality but also a change in demographics. The informants of this study form a very diverse group, supporting this position. Seven respondents were above

¹⁰ De Zuniga and Valenzuela (2010) summarize their findings on the page "xxxiv" of the "profile pages" section of the book.

the age of 35 years, and among them, five were above 50 years. All of them were graduates (including one with a doctoral degree, and another pursuing a PhD).

A few interviewees were very experienced activists who have been politically active throughout their lives. Those activists particularly focus on LGBT issues, and some of them are members of foundations that actively stand for LGBT rights. For instance, one respondent moved to Hawaii from the US mainland, where he had been active in the Civil Unions debate for more than 20 years. Here is how he explains his focus:

“Here in Hawaii I focus pretty much on Civil Unions and [our organization]. When I was in [the mainland] I’ve been in non-profits, advocacy groups for about 20 years now. My major was journalism. [Our] mission is securing equality for all LGBT people.”

“Civil Unions has been the biggest activity right now. It’s been the rallying point. However there’re many other issues now to focus, like adding a gender identity, and safe schools. Civil Unions is a second class marriage. We’re now thinking about how to elevate the conversation to marriage.”

Another interviewee, who challenges the idea that Facebook and Twitter are only for youngsters, is a 70-year-old activist who also came to Hawaii from the US mainland. She worked as a college professor, and has authored a few books. She explains that she has been active for more than fifty years. She also focuses mainly on LGBT issues. These observations suggest that new media can now be considered a set of tools which have been developed to such an extent that they are no longer a “generational” phenomenon.

For some activists, new media have been the platform of choice to enter mainstream politics. Two interviewees of this study, for instance, were new to politics,

and the Civil Unions debate has been the entry point in their political activism. There are at least two factors that explain why they entered politics. The first factor is their interest in the issue. The second factor is that, as opposed to traditional media, new media have provided them with accessible communications infrastructure. Eight of the interviewees do not use mainstream media in their activities. New media, in general, are the only mode of communication they use in their political activities.

Some activists, particularly the older ones, have seen the rise and the transformation of new media. One interesting observation of this study was that new activists start their political career within the framework of new media, or experienced activists always try to adopt the developments in alternative media in their activism. The following comments illustrate how two respondents generally think about the rise of new media:

“As new media came about, I sort of always tried to appropriate it to my own uses and the uses of groups I was involved in. The recent manifestations like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and websites, those kind of things, I probably started using those kind of things over the last six years, seven years or so.”

“I have to say I have been amazed at how fast things have changed. Here now, even four years ago an organization like [ours] was [going to] be able to conduct all of its business, all of its member communications via electronic media and not spend a dime on printing.”

This raises the questions “why are new media so attractive to activists?” and “What functions can new media perform to help public participation?” Answering these questions is important to explain the role new media played in public policy formation with respect to the Civil Unions debate in Hawaii.

Why Did Activists Use New Media During the Civil Unions Debate?

Why these activists used new media in their activities is central to understanding the role of new media in public policy. The discussions with interviewees reveal that they use new media mainly for the speed, outreach, low cost, transparency, innovativeness, and the relative ease to use. These reasons point to the general advantages of information and communication technology. The following statements show how interviewees explain why they use new media in their political activities:

“Mostly to reach more people and to communicate in more compelling ways. Enhance the distribution and the visibility to the audience.”

“In old days you had to print invitations, you had to print flyers, you had to have teams of people carrying stuff and posting them everywhere that’s the only way that you can spread the word out. And now we have not spent a dime on printing except for a few things we bring to legislators. Everything has been electronic on the web.”

“Because of their low cost. You could reach out to a lot of people without spending money to print flyers, to make phone calls all over the place, you can reach people in a wide geographic area. Also because people are tuned into them and pay attention to them, but mostly because they’re low cost and it’s a really democratic way of spreading the message.”

“It’s very effective, [and] it’s so easy to take action now. Before when we sent a flyer asking them to send their senators a letter, they had to sit down with a piece of paper, and type it, put a stamp on it, and put in the mail box. The senator gets it a day later. Whereas now they can be sitting there watching TV, they type and send. This can be done in three minutes. It’s engaged people that probably would’ve never said a word in the past.”

“It’s instant. It used to be so slow when there was no internet. If we wanted people to write their legislator or their city council person, and the hearing is tomorrow, we’re [in trouble]. The only option we had was to jump on the phone and start calling people and say we need you to call [th]em right now. Whereas now, ‘oh the hearing is tomorrow, let’s do some action alerts, go to Facebook, start tweeting,’ and they sit down at 2 o’clock in the morning and start typing an

e-mail and send it to the legislator. And it's there by like 2 o'clock in the morning. They can check it on the phone."

According to the comments above, Facebook group administrators do not compare new media with mainstream media tools such as newspapers, radio, or television. Instead, they view new media as superior alternatives to methods like sending print-flyers, phone calls and letters. For an ex-nonprofit worker, retired college professor, employee in a non-profit organization, or a graduate student, it might be difficult to use traditional media in his or her political activities. For instance, it takes a lot of time to get published a letter or an article one submits to a newspaper. Obtaining time on a radio or a TV program to express their views is even more difficult. Therefore, in the past, activists at the grass-roots level were limited to more traditional tools (flyers, posters, phone calls and letters). In the perspective of activists, new media are sophisticated tools which replace those traditional tools and increase the effectiveness and efficiency of their work. Therefore, in a more activist-based view, the emergence of new media could be called a rise of the "citizen-centered" or "citizen-based media." The idea of citizen-based media is not new. *The State of the News Media: An Annual Report on American Journalism* (2009) explains the role of the citizen-based media. This report explains that, in 2008, citizens contributed to the flow of news by producing news, commentary, distributing news as well as aggregating news around their agendas. New media have given the public cost effective and efficient mechanisms to perform these functions, and organize themselves with regards to their involvement in policy making processes.

One could raise the question "Are these roles played by new media more significant than the role played by the traditional media?" Understanding how those administrators of new media forums answer this question is important as it might provide

interesting insights into the relative importance ascribed to new media applications by activists.

What do new media activists think about traditional media?

The interviews provided mixed results as to how respondents compare new media with traditional media. Some activists do not see why new media are not as trustworthy as other modes of communication. One respondent explains that all media are run by people and there is no solid reason as to why new media tools are inferior to a TV station or newspaper. According to him, the fact that new media being “new” is the reason for people to be skeptical about it. The following are two positive comments about new media:

“There’s a lot of variables to look at. What I would look at is ‘is it serious, trustworthy, authoritative, and comprehensive?’ I think new media can be all those things.”

“Traditional media is what we used to depend on. If I read in the Star Advertiser it might be probably true, if read in New York Times, undoubtedly true. New media is another platform for a serious conversation. I think one of the challenges with the frustration is that it is ephemeral. I think all media is ephemeral of course.”

Some activists see traditional media as having more status than new media.

Traditional media might have more status since they are well established in society.

Traditional media emerge as institutions which give them more status in a society.

Activists seem to consider traditional media as tools necessary for policy makers as they have to be more formal when they communicate with citizens. Conversely, activists think that policymakers are influenced more by traditional media while citizens can be influenced by both new and traditional media. Although one administrator of a new

media forum has used mainstream media in her activism, she also explains that activists tend to use new media more than traditional media.

“I think traditional media has more status. For some people, [policy] makers that you’re trying to influence, traditional media works. You say ‘oh I had an update in the Star Advertiser or the Boston Globe’ that works. If you say ‘oh...did you check my blog?’ people are like ‘oh, no...I didn’t get to that.’

“Here in the Civil Unions struggle I’ve done that a lot through TV shows. We have negotiated with different shows. I’ve been torturing all those folks. However, you hit more people with the Facebook. Although on the other hand I see more the [policy] makers see the newspaper, like Star Advertiser, than activists. Activists are much more likely to see Facebook.”

People still very much want to be in the Star Advertiser, they [want to] be in KITV. They want the breadth of that audience, they want the numbers associated with them. It’s broadcast.

Some Facebook group administrators think that new media applications are even better than traditional media for organizing the public to influence policy. The following comments reveal some advantages of new media as opposed to the traditional media: (1) they shorten the news cycle, (2) they are faster, more active, and (3) accessible.

According to one interviewee, Facebook is the most valuable tool available for activists.

“There’s a news cycle, 12-hour news cycle, then 6-hour, 4-hour, now it’s like 30 minutes. I think new media has accelerated that process. You’re never really up-to-date. You’re never really current. It’s a challenge to find a way to grapple with that reality. You’re never 100% current unless you look at your screen. The other question is ‘do you need to be?’”

“Social media is more active. It bridges more gaps I think than traditional media. Traditional media is sort of informing you what’s going on. It’s one sided.”

“It’s the most valuable tool available for activists. This is where it’s happening. There’s no question.”

Although some activists think that new media are more helpful than traditional media, one should be careful about the validity of these comments. It is important to

understand that traditional media are beyond the reach of many activists. This study does not conclude that new media play a bigger role than traditional media. Such a conclusion would have to be based on a study of the role of traditional media behavior in the debate: but that analysis lies beyond the scope of this study.

The Role New Media Play in Public Policy

In this chapter I discuss the role new media played during the Civil Unions debate. First, I discuss the functions of new media using four subtopics: (1) functions of new media during the Civil Unions debate, (2) new media tools as elements of a Constituent Management System (CMS), (3) Facebook as the archive of the activist, and (4) the supportive role of YouTube and Flickr. Then I use two subtopics to explain activists' perception of their constituency: (1) constituency of citizens engaged with the Civil Unions Debate, and (2) reader-to-activist transition. Two subtopics are used to explain the emergence of issue-oriented new media platforms: (1) the rise of issue-oriented new media platforms, and (2) "issue-oriented" or "adaptive" media platforms?

In general, traditional media follow values such as being unbiased and factual. Ethical standards such as objectivity govern traditional media, keeping them from making controversial statements and attacking people (Davis and Owen 1998, 19). Even though there might be institutional biases with traditional media organizations, they are expressed as institutional choices of actions rather than personal choices of journalists. In new media, administrators of forums attempt to gather members around their activism. Most new media forums are subjective. In particular, forums created by individual users pursue subjective interests. New media forums openly take positions, rally in support for

their positions, and focus on policy changes more than opinion changes. There are several ways to do that: (1) educate people about the issue, (2) make them aware about how they can participate in policy decisions, (3) provide examples for how they can participate in policy decisions, and (4) work as an intermediary between the public and policy makers by leading people to participate. These functions are more active than the reporting function of traditional media. Although traditional journalists may have political positions, they may not have enough freedom to openly perform these functions. The following statements show particular purposes which the administrators of Facebook groups used new media for:

“Make more people aware of the issue, also try to elevate the dialogue, sometimes there can be a lot of angry words and there can be a lot of misinformation, but sometimes the person who talks the loudest gets the most attention even if they’re not really stating the fact. So try to find ways to bring the conversation to a different level, to reach more people.”

“One of our key objectives is to get more people involved with [our group] over any other organized activist groups. There were, there are and there continue to be people out there who support equality but who don’t have a framework for their efforts. It’s important to try to get more people become a member, do something, send out action alert, write letters to the senator.”

“It’s organizing people. It’s also raising people’s consciousness, educating them about the issue. Because as leaders we spend more time studying issues and we know more about the issues than the people we’re trying to organize. I always believe as a leader you can’t get too far ahead of the people you’re trying to organize. I think that the fastest way to influence a lot of people and get them organized is by going on Facebook pages and by using things like constant contact to send out alerts to people that things are happening.”

“To sort of get people together and motivated about an issue. With Facebook, Twitter and things like that it’s easier to reach a wide group of people. And they also have dialogue. People are allowed to make comments and to ask questions from you directly. You get people that you never know, in Facebook contacting you about this issue.”

The above statements show that Facebook group administrators pursue their subjective interests. They have their own positions about issues and they attempt to recruit activists using new media. While it is possible that traditional journalists also openly support or oppose policy changes, people have more freedom in the new media space. Facebook posts or Twitter feeds do not need to be objective. People often post emotional messages on Facebook. They can freely share their discontent or agreement with policy decisions with their Facebook friends. This is not the case in traditional media in which editorial work plays a significant role. Facts and objectivity play a bigger role in traditional media. I argue that the freedom in new media to send factual as well as emotional messages help activists to attract constituents. During the Civil Unions debate, especially after Governor Linda Lingle vetoed the House Bill 444, administrators of new media forums started intense campaigns in new media. There were more than a dozen groups related to the issue, supporting and opposing the legislation. These groups used new media tools extensively to update members about the legislation and motivate people to influence policy makers.

The above discussion leads to another question: “can new media activists change public opinion since they have the ‘freedom’ to openly lobby in support of their positions?” Administrators of Facebook pages attempt to change the opinions of people and motivate people to join activists. However, either they are not confident or not certain that they are able to change public opinion. According to the following statements, the interviewees of this study are skeptical about their ability to change public opinions towards the Civil Unions in Hawaii.

“We’re getting people to change their opinion although I’m not sure how much we talk to people who don’t already agree with our opinion. Sometimes people friend me in Facebook and they are clearly in the opposition, they’re sending nasty messages, but that has been infrequent.”

“I don’t think I’m trying to change people’s minds. I’m trying to allow people to be more informed about an issue. A lot of people don’t get a lot of information. Media coverage is sort of limited. It does require a lot of background information. A lot of people don’t have time to reach those bills and understand the history of those bills.”

“Most people who look, bother to find or who have heard about what we’re doing I think is like ‘preaching to the choir,’ preaching to the converted, I think this is one of the challenges, how do you reach to the people who don’t already agree with you fundamentally. How do you change the positions or opinions if you’re not talking to the opposition? We all have our frameworks, predispositions, but we’re actually being exposed to other people’s ideas. I don’t know if social media account for that.”

As illustrated by the third comment above, some activists seem to think that they can attract only those with similar views. This claim can be quite true. People may not join Facebook groups of their opponents. This may limit the openness of new media. However, new media activists may have a broader audience. They can attract politically inactive people rather than thinking about their opponents. The following comments support this argument. Even though Facebook group administrators are hesitant about their ability to change public opinion, they believe that they can use new media to bring attention to the issues. One administrator thinks that at least their new media campaigns were able to convince people to rethink their positions regarding various issues. The following two comments illustrate how information posted on new media can get the attention of inactive peers and those members who oppose the position of an administrator. However, at this level, there is no evidence to conclude if this has actually happened in the Civil Unions issue. Facebook and Twitter are mainly friendship-based

networks in which people keep posting updates for their friends. Activists may have Facebook friends who oppose their positions. It is possible that activists can get the attention of those friends and make them rethink about their positions. Therefore, I do not reject the idea that new media activism may change opinions of peers or friends of activists.

“I think what Facebook does is, let’s say you’re on Facebook. You’ve never thought about this issue before. And then all of a sudden you see all of your friends are talking about it. Then you’re [going to] say ‘oh...what’s this all about?’ Then you’re [going to] start reading your friends’ posts, and think ‘you know, they’re right.’ It gets people that may have never thought about it. In that particular case we move someone from being apathetic to get engaged.”

“Some of the friends that are hard right wingers, that are totally against Civil Unions. Those folks never change. It’s not [going to] change their minds. But it can, when they’re on Facebook, they see some of their friends, and they’re like ‘I have to be careful about my position.’ Sometimes they’re [going to] start thinking.”

The above discussion show that activists pay more attention on developing and keeping a network of people that supports their positions rather than changing the opinions of those who oppose. Activating politically inactive supporters may be easier than changing the opinions of active or inactive opponents. On the activists’ side, this has been the case at least in this study.

Functions of New Media during Civil Unions Debate

Activists have used new media in at least two ways to stir public participation. On the one hand, they have used new media to manage their campaigns. These campaigns include activities to motivate people to testify orally, sign wave, talk to legislators, march and be involved in fundraising events. On the other hand, activists have used new media

forums to help/motivate people to testify electronically, and lobby for their policy preferences online. New media tools function as a system to help achieve these objectives of administrators. Facebook, Twitter, Websites, Blogs, e-mail, and even smart phone applications are connected today. For instance, when one Facebook group posts an update on its Facebook wall, this post can be automatically sent as a tweet in Twitter. A message is sent to a personal mobile phone through Smartphone applications (e.g. Facebook mobile, Twitter mobile). Whenever an activist tags a person in a post, an e-mail notification is sent to the person. In general, this is how most of the Facebook group administrators interviewed in this study used new media during the Civil Unions issue. Through new media applications, all the interviewees sent messages to their members about dates of hearings, how to testify, what to explain in the testimony, some success stories, contacts of legislators, when to come to the state capitol for sign waving, what to bring for the sign waving, and many more messages relevant to the issue. In most cases, these messages were short and sent instantly. For instance, as most interviewees explained, they sent at least two reminders after they sent action alerts. Another interesting observation was that these groups have used each other's new media forums, particularly Facebook pages and blogs, to promote their activities.

New media usage in Civil Unions, as explained above, has developed the connected functioning of different tools. This significantly reduces the time and effort on the activists' side. This is another area where new media play a different role than other forms of communication. Activists had to allocate time and other resources separately for each communication method (e.g. flyers, letters and phone calls) they used before. Traditional media also (e.g. newspaper, radio and television) do not interact with each

other when they function. The boundaries between each tool in the new media environment are not as clear as traditional media and other methods such as letters, and telephone. Different new media forums can be used as entry points for the public to access more information in the whole new media space. As one interviewee explained, any tool like Facebook, Twitter, a website, blog and an e-mail can be the entry point to access information. He explains that activists should link all these tools so that members can move from one tool to another, and come back easily. The following comment supports my argument that current new media should be understood as a network of different applications that interact with each other.

“Facebook is some kind of a gateway to our website that’s more engaged and in-depth. It’s like ‘[our group] has added this story, check this out’ they click on it and it links them into our website where they can read the whole story and that’s where some of their opinions are [going to] get changed.”

Social networks can function as gateways to other new media forums. Although social networks provide the facility to promote (or advertise) information in other forums, merely posting links to other websites may not be sufficient to motivate people. Activists can use different new media applications innovatively to provide constant updates about social issues. They can increase the efficiency and effectiveness of their work by linking those applications.

New media, going beyond traditional boundaries, focus on keeping constant contact with the audience. This is not similar to keeping a stable readership for a newspaper or maintaining a segment of viewers for a TV program. It is more akin to keeping a possible group of activists updated about the status of the issue and the related legislation. It is quite uncommon that a TV station or a newspaper agency asks citizens to

come to the Capitol and testify in support of a given piece of legislation. Moreover, it is unusual if a TV station organizes a protesting campaign against a particular bill. This is one area where, at least in the case of Civil Unions, the role of new media differs from the traditional media. New media activists organize protesting campaigns and manage their campaigns using new media. The traditional media, being objective, report about what is happening.

New Media Tools as Elements of a Constituent Management System

This study found several interesting uses, and perhaps new approaches to link each new media tool which helps generate public participation. The regular uses of Facebook have mainly been limited to posting, sending messages, and invitations. It is more interesting to understand the unique ways these activists have used new media in their activities. Some groups of activists go further by developing Constituent Management Systems (CMSs) which they connect to their Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, web sites and e-mail boxes of members. A CMS provides the administrators the facility to keep a database of members and communicate with them through different new media tools connected to the system. This is a more advanced way of using new media as they provide administrators with a mechanism to monitor the activities happening in the entire network. According to one respondent, they have measured how many members visited their pages, sent testimony online. Furthermore, they have even the content of the messages sent by constituents to legislators.

“We have a constituent management system which basically houses, like when we send an e-mail out it tracks who has opened it, and when they opened it if they clicked on any of the URLs, it tells us who clicked on what, and they’ve taken

actions and written their senators, it saves what you sent to the senators. So we can make sure that no crazy and inappropriate things are sent.”

“It gives us the power to go into the legislator and say that ‘we know that you’ve received 300 e-mails this week. We have data to back up what we’re saying.’”

“We can also gauge how our members feel about an issue by watching how they respond. For instance, when the bill got stalled last year people were angry, they were also like ‘oh it’s a done deal, it’s dead.’ So they kind of stopped. We were able to pick that back up again. When Governor Lingle vetoed we expressed our anger to Governor Lingle with the highest number of members. During the entire period with Governor Lingle we picked up about a thousand members.”

Obtaining workable feedback is one challenge faced by activists. A Constituent Management System provides a mechanism to obtain feedback on the activity level. However, there is the question whether it is possible for individual activists or groups of average people to develop constituent management software. For the activist group that has a CMS, Facebook and Twitter have performed a somewhat different function. In addition to sending action alerts and regular posts, Facebook and Twitter have been the places to post instant messages which they do not want to send to the personal e-mail addresses of members. The following statements show how Facebook and Twitter were used by activists who have CMSs.

“Facebook and Twitter are sort of part of the strategy. The Constituent Management System is the heart and soul of the strategy. If you hit your members so many times, they’ll start saying ‘leave me alone.’ Then you’ll lose people. If it’s an emergency you can get away with sending like in a 48-hour window. We’re usually trying to get our members about a three-day period before we get them something. With Facebook, You can’t look at anyone individually. They are connected. We use Facebook, to do that immediately. We can’t really send something out through our system because we send out an e-mail yesterday. But this new thing has just come up. So we’re using Facebook to get that information out.”

“We can’t send everything through our CMS. There’s the general rule that everything’s [got to] be short, it can’t be very long because most people won’t

read it. And secondly, [we send] one topic e-mail, because we can't ask them to do too many things. They'll get confused [with Facebook], we can put out other media stories that we think that members might be interested in and it positions us to look like we've got our hands on what's going on. They can share it with their friends."

According to the above statements, activists consider Facebook and Twitter forums where they can upload information without giving their members a sense of overload. The statements above also suggest that it is the design of Facebook and Twitter that explains their effectiveness. These tools provide a person the space to talk to multiple readers at once. Whenever a person accepts a friendship request or gets the membership of a group operating in a social network, it is assumed that he gives his friends or the Facebook group the freedom to post on his wall. This is different from a personal e-mail account. E-mail is more focused and is more personal than a Facebook profile. Even though a Facebook user has a "personal wall," it is less personal than a personal website and an e-mail account. In this sense, Facebook breaks the "personal-barrier" which in turn might help increase public attention on an issue. One activist explained that instant messages are very important today as people are busy with their own work. Sending instant messages helps activists to keep their members informed. This helps people to make quick decisions related to their participation.

Facebook as the Archive of the Activist

The administrator of one Facebook group views posting on Facebook as a way of archiving information relating to Civil Unions. This activist highlights that his Facebook page is one of the best forums with a lot of important information about LGBT issues. He mentions that a person is not certain for how long a traditional media organization keeps news reports and other important information. Facebook according to him is a place for

archiving over which he has complete control. The following comments are examples for the “archiving function” of Facebook. These comments support the argument made by Briggie (2010, 163) that Facebook is a place rather than a channel. One cannot archive anything in a channel. An archive is always related to a place. The archiving function of Facebook shows that the new media has provided people places to easily store issue related information. However, online archives are not similar to conventional archives maintained by public agencies or other organizations. Facebook group administrators can control information posted on their Facebook walls. They can keep this information as long as they want. Therefore, Facebook pages can be “personal archives” rather than formal archives.

“For me Facebook is like the filter. I put everything that I think is interesting and relevant. Then I look at it again. Then I tweet that are the timely and time sensitive items. Then I put things in the [our] news page as a way of kind of archiving.”

It’s kind of like my notebook because if you think about all the information coming in, there’s media information, there’s my Facebook friends who’re telling me things, e-mails information from organizations I belong to. The first place I put things that I think are interesting is my Facebook page. I just put it there. In a day or two or in the end of the day I might tweet something for [our group], fun and interesting things. I also update the news room page of [our] web.”

According to the comments above, Facebook has also been a broad platform which an activist used to filter information. He first puts all information on Facebook, selects important information and then sends tweets, then sends special e-mails if there are more important content. This forms the background for them to send action alerts about their activities. This is what the above respondent refers to as “filtering.”

Accordingly, Facebook has been the starting point of some activities like sending tweets, and action alerts.

Another observation related to the archiving function is that new media can help people stay focused. For one interviewee, Facebook is a tool that helps him to stay focused on the issue of Civil Unions while providing his group members constant updates and information about an issue. He explains that a good citizen-leader should always search for information and be updated about the issue and policy changes. Moreover, he suggests that a leader should find interesting examples relating to policy changes and bring them to the attention of his constituents. The following comment shows how he thinks about his Facebook page.

“Facebook, for me, I use it to stay focused, to stay organized on the issue, among many other interesting things. I try to keep my advocacy page focused especially on LGBT civil rights. In a way it kind of disciplines me to stay focused on that, to stay current.”

The above comment shows that there are instances where Facebook has helped an activist to develop self-discipline which he needs to be a good citizen-leader. The overwhelming complaint against Facebook and Twitter is that they are the forums where people post a lot of unnecessary information. For instance, one activist talks about the complaint that some people’s Facebook walls are full of updates about what their friends had for dinner and how angry one of their friends was because of heavy traffic on his/her way back home. Fairweather and Halpern (2010, 191) note, “a Facebook-skeptic would ask: Why would anyone want to read about the bookshelf you just put up, or your appreciation of churros? Isn’t this a grand waste of time and nothing but an exercise of vanity?” The above observation suggests reconsidering this idea, as it shows that when used for political purposes, these new media tools can discipline people around an issue.

Moreover, this observation shows that some might find aspects of an issue trivial while others may find them important.

The Supportive Role of YouTube and Flickr

Videos and pictures are two important aspects of new media. Activists use YouTube and Flickr in combination with Facebook and Twitter. They upload videos in YouTube, pictures in Flickr and post the links in Facebook and Twitter. This helps them to use special facilities of each website to develop more appealing messages. The following illustrates how activists use YouTube and Flickr:

“Personally I like Facebook and I like YouTube. I like being able to post videos on YouTube and I like to post then the video to Facebook.”

“Flickr I use for big events, for example, tomorrow I’ll go to the capitol and I’ll take photos of what happens as the vote comes down in the Senate, Flickr I find good for that because you can post a lot of photos. So, you get a lot of people in the photos. If you tell the people ‘oh, go to my Flickr site tomorrow, you’ll see photos.’ They’ll look for photos of themselves but they’ll also see all of these other photos. In Facebook, may be I would upload 20 photos.”

These observations also support the argument that current new media applications function together. Activists use each application for a unique purpose while combining them to achieve broad objectives. In a broader sense, the above comments provide an example of how society adopts new media by discovering new ways to use them.

According to this discussion, new media have been the collection of interactive tools that activists used to organize people and inspire them to testify, contact legislators and rally for the policy changes they prefer. The discussion above exposes one side of the role of new media in policy. That is, how and why new media have been important public resources during the Civil Unions issue in Hawaii. Accordingly, the discussion above

indicates that new media provide activists with the infrastructure to organize the public to participate in policy making.

Constituency of Citizens Engaged with Civil Unions Debate

One important aspect of new media in the policy context is related to new media's ability to actually mobilize citizens. As an approach to understand new media's ability to mobilize people in political activities, it is important to understand the constituency of new media activists. Interview questions on the activist's ideas about their constituency provided mixed answers. Some activists view their constituents as a group of politically active citizens. To another, constituency seems changing from youngsters to include citizens of different age groups. According to the interview data, administrators are unaware of the profiles of their membership. However, one interesting comment made by one activist was that although they do not have a clear sense of the membership of their forums, Facebook has a controlled membership. He can disconnect anyone from the group.

Members who join a group that supports or opposes Civil Unions have to make a rational decision. An individual's choice to join a Facebook group that helps civil unions and his level of activity in that group has an impact on his/her social status. One activist highlights that it is not the gender, age, or sexual orientation that matters in terms of the constituency of his forum. It is the self-discipline of the member that is more important in new media. Therefore, he suggests that educating members about the issue is more important than analyzing their gender, age, education or sexual orientation of the members. Although demographic information of his constituents is not important for this

activist, there may be many others who would like to know about the membership profile of Facebook groups. For instance, prospective members of Facebook groups may be interested to know his or her future group members. Moreover, demographic information may be important for both activists and members when deciding what information they can post, and how they should comment.

The following are the examples of respondents' perception of the membership of their forums:

“Our Facebook membership is about 1,100. There's a lot of people on Facebook. Those people are the ones that are most engaged. A lot are political activists. My Facebook page is for people who're active about relationship equality, marriage equality and Civil Unions.”

“It started with a younger audience. I started Facebook groups about 3-4years ago, on this issue. These people, you know the younger generation, they were already on Facebook. Recently, the demographics sort of changed. There are a lot of older people, middle aged people, and senior citizens are on it. That's a sort of mobilization. Facebook sort of simplified it to a point where even my grandma uses Facebook.”

“It is a generational thing. The older people, we have older member that don't have Facebook. The only way we can get them through our CMS. However, the younger people, they're on Facebook and that's how they're comfortable talking these days. And there're some other people that they had to realize this is the future.”

“I don't know much about [them]. There's a group of people who like everything I post, just to encourage. There's a group of people who actually get involved in some dialogue back and forth. Some people think it's a free forum. I think Facebook is a self selective forum. It's pretty controlled, actually, for good and bad.”

Understanding who is missing is another approach to identify those who use new media. Some administrators of new media forums think that they miss professionals like professors, intellectuals, and legislators. This might have been caused by the still

prevailing attitude among professionals that forums like Facebook and Twitter are not places for serious discussions. Following comment shows that there are some activists who like to receive suggestions from intellectuals and they would like to have input to develop strategies. One might argue that professionals do not have enough time to pay attention to the discussions in social media. Some respondents disagree with this idea. As highlighted by the second comment below, new media may be suitable for busy professionals to keep updated about an issue since new media applications like Twitter send information as short messages.

“I miss people who are intellectuals who can talk about ideas, who can flesh out the ideas, who can improve my ideas, who can see a problem with a plan that I have in my mind. I mean the real thing of talking through an idea, a strategy. I miss that.”

“We’re missing people that don’t have time to read news feed. I think Facebook does well in that too because it brings information in short scripts. That’s better than reading an article in a newspaper.”

The fact that new media activists are unaware of the profile of their constituents seems to reveal another aspect in new media activism. In face-to-face encounters people might get to know each other and develop social relationships among them. In the new media environment, the identity might be of less significance than in real world relationships. New media provide people the space to change their identities, and sometimes, make multiple identities. Therefore, new media activists might not be attentive to the profile of their constituents.

Reader-to-Activist Transition

Both administrators and members are equally important in new media. On one hand, administrators have freedom to openly lobby for policy changes they advocate. As

Davis and Owen (1998, 20) note, one difference between traditional journalists and new media activists is that new media activists are more likely to use their positions openly to motivate readers. On the other hand, readers or members have the space to write, post, and comment on the information provided. Social networks provide the facility to post links to any other web page. This design of new media forums might support rousing active engagement of the readers/ members. The questions that focused on the “reader-to-activist transition” also provided mixed results. Although some activists do not have an idea about the membership profile of their forums, they seem to have an idea about new members joining the group. Moreover, they seem to have a sense of how many of them are actively engaged. Following are three statements that basically show the passive aspect of members. Three ideas can be traced using these statements. First, even though new people join their groups, administrators may not have a clear idea about the number of new members that are actively engaged in participation. Second, even though members are passive in terms of activism, they seem to understand the objective difference between their personal Facebook wall and that of an activist group. Third, inter-activist group interaction is an important aspect of new media activism.

“I do see new faces, new names popping, I get new friend requests. But I don’t know how it connects to the world of action.”

“When they see [our] Facebook page, they’re sort of looking at it like ‘this is [their] business only, and the fact that I got a new dog is not really relevant. Or that’s not the proper forum to post what I had lunch for today. That belongs to my personal homepage.’ And that’s where they’re [going to] post it. At least on that thing people have been very respectful.”

“Most of the people don’t post on our site. The ones that do post are the people from other groups. They’re trying to get their information out to our members, and we do the same to them. As far as what members do, they’re commenting and they’re ‘liking.’ They see it on their news feed and they click ‘yeah I like this.’”

One aspect of action that influences policy decisions is that these new media forums facilitate the submission of testimony online. The State of Hawaii accepts online testimony. All new media forums studied in this study provided sample testimony, sent individual messages with a link to the online testimony, provided web links to the State Capitol. These activities might help increase the number of testimonies submitted.

One advantage of online public participation is that it might provide those who are hesitant to give oral testimony the opportunity to voice their concerns. The Civil Unions debate, as highlighted by some activists, is the best example for this. Being a sensitive topic, Civil Unions attracted the attention of groups that might be considered minorities. Some activists explain that the main minority groups that are benefited by this legislation (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) might be shy to come out and testify in public. The opportunity to testify online may give them the chance to testify in support of the Civil Unions. This is an interesting observation as it shows that the voices of minority groups can be heard through this facility. However, one could argue that a testimony typed, printed and sent by regular post would provide the same opportunity. This argument is correct. New media's addition to this advantage is the efficiency of the process. New media provide the same service, that is, submission of the testimony, quickly in a cost effective way.

However, there may be issues related to online participation. One issue is related to the reliability of representation. New media provide the space for people to "multiply" themselves in the virtual environment. A single person could create many Facebook profiles, Twitter and e-mail accounts. If these "identities" are considered formal by policy making bodies, it would mislead public participation. The number of people who testify

might be an important indicator for decision makers. Online public participation may not provide accurate numbers if a single person sends more than one testimony. Although activists motivate members to participate, most of the activists do not receive enough feedback about the online participation of their constituents. Therefore, activists may not be able to guarantee that their constituents send only one testimony. The following is an example of the kind of feedback that activists get about online public participation. One important idea of this statement is that the feedback from a new media effort is sometimes self reporting.

“One thing we can do through social media is you steer for people to take an action. I don’t really know. Sometimes when I call for action when I say, ‘send in your testimony,’ people would say ‘great I just did,’ did they? I don’t know. It’s self reporting.”

Administrators of some new media forums were confident that they were able to mobilize citizens to influence policy decisions. Action alerts sent through Facebook seem to have played an important role in their communication activities. The following comment shows the belief that Facebook is a necessary tool today. One important aspect of Facebook is that it connects a person’s friendship network with his or her political life. Therefore, Facebook may have the ability to bring a person’s friend to politics.

“We’ve gotten some of the older folks to start. We keep saying we’ll post it in Facebook. You’ve got to start Facebook. You need to come into the 21st century. There’re people that aren’t in our database, but are on our Facebook page.”

The following is an example of an administrator of a Facebook group who brings her students into the Civil Unions Facebook page. She explained that she always tries to

bring her friends, students and relatives to help her political activities with respect to Civil Unions.

“I put my energy into young people. I taught in the college for about 38 years. I’m still in touch with lots of my students on Facebook. Around marriage equality issues, many of them aren’t necessarily concerned about that. But they see that I’m concerned about that, I get a lot of feedback from my students. I think that’s really good because many of them are also teachers now. It’s kind of like keeping the word going. They’re students. They get it. You know bringing them to hearings, bringing them to state house, and bringing them to demonstrations about different issues. When you really think about who really is engaged, who’s making political change. When something big erupts, people come up.”

A compelling evidence of new people coming to politics came from the activist whose group uses a Constituent Management System. He explains that linking Facebook, Twitter, Websites, Blogs, e-mail and other databases is very important to use new media effectively. This group has linked Facebook action alerts to their website and CMS. When a member sends out a message or testimony, it goes to the State Capitol through their system. Therefore, the administrators can track how many messages were added during a particular period. This gives them a sense of the number of active members. He mentions that more than 300,000 messages were sent to legislators during last three years. He mentions that a considerable number of those messages are testimonies from people.

“We have action alerts. Right now we’re getting ready to launch ‘thanks to senate for their vote’ in the Facebook page. We put that on Facebook saying ‘hey you should thank your senators’ and they’ll click on that, then in our system, if they’re [going to] take the action they have to join. We can do that in e-mail too.”

“So it’s kind of sewing all the pieces together. We look at our metrics, in the bottom of all our e-mails we have logos of Facebook, Twitter, Flickr. There’re people that are clicking on our Facebook icon from our e-mails. We have had

about 300,000 e-mails going to the capital during last two and a half years. Those include ‘thank you’s, petitions, requests, all of them.’”

He further explains that he has enough evidence to conclude that their new media work has been able to bring to politics people who have never thought about influencing policy. Being savvy in technology is very important to influence people today, he explains. He mentions that the group continuously sends e-mails to its members through the Constituent Management System. These e-mails often contain links to their website, Facebook page, and other important websites. The system automatically identifies inactive members and deletes their contacts. The system provides reports of the activities happening in the system. According to him, their membership is the most active and the biggest activist group on Civil Unions in Hawaii.

“It has empowered people to center especially around Civil Unions. Our membership has been almost 6500 now. The bulk of those people were never on anybody’s list in Hawaii. We found a list of e-mails and loaded them into our system. They were only e-mail addresses, no names. Over time, most of those have fallen off. Let’s say, once you send an e-mail, you don’t have that e-mail anymore. Once you hit, you can call it a hard bounce. If it’s a hard bounce it takes that e-mail address out of the system. If your mail box is full, it’ll wait for like five soft bounces. The system will automatically check if it’s a hard bounce or a soft bounce, and then delete your address from the system.”

“The people that are on the system, they’ve never been engaged in politics. This is new territory for them. Actually some people said, ‘I was never political until I started getting your e-mails.’”

This advocate explains that new media being active is an important aspect of the democracy in the new world as advanced technology, particularly fast growing online social networks, provides people the chance to decide their destiny. He explains how happy some of his constituents were after they sent a letter to a senator, submitted testimony, and participated in a rally or a public hearing.

“The fact that they’re getting engaged is, they know they’re deciding their own destiny. They say ‘You know, I wrote to the senator.’ That’s a big joy. You know a member sends an e-mail to us and says ‘I’ve never done this before’ and we say ‘it’s ok, they’re not [going to] come and hit you. They’re not [going to] come and knock on your door. Just tell the senator your story, and why you think that this is a good decision, speak from the heart, and you’ll move them’ and they send the letter and they say ‘oh I sent the letter, oh she wrote back, and she was so nice and so sweet.’ And that’s the dialogue that’ll continue happening. We could never send that person a message again, but they’ll say that they have a friend at the Capitol and they’re [going to] continue interacting with them.”

Although activists think that they were able to get new people involved, this evidence is not strong enough to conclude that new media can always bring new citizen participants. At any point in time, there will citizens who start to get involved in politics. New media may not affect their entry into politics. However, the discussion above shows that we cannot exclude new media from politics. New media may provide easy and accessible avenues of engagement for those who enter into politics.

New media can be used to get the public involvement at two levels. First, people can be motivated to contribute actively online. The discussion above shows how this has happened during Civil Unions debate in Hawaii. The second level of engagement is that people can be encouraged to physically attend events, meetings, and to give testimony. Most of the administrators interviewed organized activities like sign waving, marches, fundraising campaigns, and meetings. Some activists explained during the interviews the roles played by the members of their forums. Supporting this study’s argument that new media might be able to motivate readers to be activists, interviewees explained that they have active members who comment in the forum, post information as well as join activities organized by them. One interviewee clearly mentions that people become activists if people use new media tools in smart ways. However, some interviewees

mention that developing good feedback mechanisms are very important for activists who use new media to influence policy making processes.

“I’m working with three major groups. One of them is sort of a forum. A lot of people just talk in that. But other two are direct action grassroots. It’s really effective. People actually become activists.”

“Majority of people are active on the Facebook page. That’s part of the reason why you joined the group. Because you have an interest in it.”

“Right now with the bill passed, it worked. I think it’s largely through constant contact, sending out messages through Facebook and other listservs like Yahoo or Google groups, that kind of things. Facebook page for Citizens for Equal Rights and the web page for Citizens for Equal Rights work great.”

“It’s hard to get people actually motivated to act. We learned how to actually track them, who’s sending letters, who’s writing, and who’s sending testimony. You can just track them by numbers in the website. It’s harder to see actually people coming down. We definitely know that people are going and testifying. But we don’t have a direct feedback mechanism. There’re so many people in Facebook that ask ‘when should I be there?’”

The above discussion shows that new media bring in new citizen participants.

This happens, as explained above, at two levels: online and as traditional political activists. Although new media forum administrators have a sense of new citizens participating in the policymaking process online, they do not have a clear idea about the impact of their online campaigns on political activities they organize outside cyberspace. This shows the difference between online and other activities. Although activists can measure the online participation, it is difficult for them to obtain feedback about the success of their campaigns in the real world. Although this suggests that new media brings in new participants, this is not conclusive because this study does not gather data from new citizen participants.

The Rise of Issue-oriented New Media Platforms

Many authors claim that the rise of new media changes the nature of political activism. For instance, Davis (1999, 62) notes that the emergence of new media politics is perhaps the beginning of the end of interest group politics that society is familiar with today. Interactivity is probably the main characteristic of today's new media. This characteristic is more intense with social networks as an action of one member in a network can be seen, and is noticed by the network. New media, according to the preceding discussion, has been a platform for activists to motivate public participation and a tool to organize their campaigns. This study establishes the idea that new media provide activists the facility to create "issue oriented media platforms." On one level, it is obvious that Facebook groups can be organized around issues. This study attempts to highlight that these groups can function on many different levels. A regular website or a blog may mainly focus on providing information and encouraging discussion. Conversely, a Facebook group can provide information, discuss issues, send action alerts, conduct online polls, and even support online participation. A Facebook group can be more active and interactive than a regular website.

Most new media forums do not produce new content as traditional media do. Instead, they provide content of a different nature. The Facebook wall basically is not a place to write articles or long stories. Instead, it can provide links to detailed articles. One activist highlights that, on a Facebook wall, they produce "meta-content" by putting together the information focused on a particular issue. This is one signal which shows that a Facebook forum is a gathering place for information related to a specific issue.

However, most of the Facebook group administrators explain that they have a “notes” page where a long article can be published.

“When you’re using [e]specially Facebook and Twitter, these are not supposed to be your websites. When you send out Facebook messages, if it’s more than 3 lines, it doesn’t belong in Facebook. No one is [going to] read it. It’s not supposed to replace a fully functional website. You have to have the integration between the two.”

Some respondents explained that even though they have published notes, those are basically of a personal nature. Another interviewee explained that she used Facebook to summarize the content of the bill, and provided some background so that members can make better decisions in terms of their participation. Administrators can also delete any unrelated material published on their Facebook walls. This may question the validity of the above claim that Facebook can function as an archive. However, I do not conclude that Facebook cannot function as an archive. Activists use new media applications for different purposes. One activist may use Facebook as an archive while another may not keep his or her Facebook posts. Functions of Facebook may depend on users as users have the control over their Facebook profiles and groups.

“There were a lot of misconceptions. There were multiple versions of the bill, the whole legislative process is confusing to people, you going to the Senate back to the House, back and forth. It’s confusing, the arguments on the other side that weren’t actually based on the bill, why it’s coming now, how it happens, why it isn’t marriage. When things are based on history, policy and more, some people may know one aspect of it, but not all aspects.”

“I just post. I rarely comment. If someone hijacks the discussion, I might ‘unfriend’ him. I’m more of a curator, or editor. I don’t generate new content. I only generate new content in the sense that by putting together some existing content you might see some new patterns. In that sense I think there is another level. Ideally there’d be kind of a meta-content that results from new ways of seeing things.”

A typical group in Facebook has a few main components. The face of the group page is a wall on which both administrators and readers can post links, write, comment and like/dislike. Further, Facebook has the facility to create tabs (or other pages) for events, discussions, notes, or any other special page administrators would like to create. Facebook provides the facility to create “events” for which members can RSVP. Once a member clicks the RSVP link, all others on the network can see this action. When more people RSVP, Facebook provides the statistics of how many friends are participating. When two or more people post the same link on their Facebook walls, Facebook automatically highlights that this link is shared by how many of one’s friends. This gives special emphasis to important new stories. These functions have provided the facility to create media platforms with multiple functions.

Some activists have created separate pages for action alerts, “video stories” of members or activists (e.g. Hawaii Family Portrait), discussions, notes, event diaries, and pictures of past activities. When an activist sends an action alert in Facebook, people can RSVP to the event so that administrators are aware of the number of people who might actually join the event. These pages are action oriented, as well as issue oriented. Accordingly, new media applications, at least Facebook, have provided the space to create platforms that facilitate gathering information related to an issue, express people’s ideas about an issue, discuss policy decisions related, lobby for support of the policy changes they prefer, and organize activities to influence policy making. This is what this study refers to as “issue oriented media platforms.”

Although not directly related, the following comments support the above argument and show that new media are gradually becoming essential tools for activists.

“Those who don’t use social media miss open dialogue. They have to write to newspapers or directly go to legislators. In Facebook I can send a message, and it’s instantly answered by multiple people. You get a lot of different opinions on it.”

“Facebook is a tool. It’s really effective. If you really want an organization to blossom, it’s [got to] be part of the bigger strategy.”

“I think if you don’t know the social media, it’s [going to] be difficult to organize. I think you really need to know it. You know, people of my age, 70s, they say ‘oh I can’t be bothered with that kind of thing.’ Then I was like ‘oh, you’re [going to] be out of it.’ Those who exclude themselves by not learning new media, they isolate themselves more. It’s about connections. Phone trees relate to 1960s. We don’t do phone trees anymore. Learn how to use the computer.”

New media offer the freedom for citizens to express their ideas. This freedom has both advantages as well as disadvantages. It is possible that a lot of misinformation may spread through new media. New media platforms, according to the comments below, are self-monitored forums as opposed to traditional media programs. However, activists should think how realistic this idea is as self discipline is perhaps not a realistic way to control activities in new media.

“New media is narrow cast. People can communicate with one another more quickly and more freely, in terms of we’re not censoring ourselves. That’s changing. People are becoming aware of the fact that what they do in social media is being monitored, is being watched by their peers, even by the authorities.”

“People who’re serious activists or who are involved in it professionally, organizations or policy makers are extremely careful about what they post on social media. It’s becoming more controlled.”

Based on the above discussion, the idea that new media provide the space to create short-term “issue oriented media platforms” can be supported. However, I do not generalize this idea to other new media applications. On the one hand, the above evidence is not sufficient to explain how issue oriented media platforms work. On the

other hand, as explained before, the functions of new media applications are different from each other. One application may not be able to function like another. For example, YouTube and Flickr cannot perform all the functions of Facebook. Even Twitter has some limited functions. Therefore, in this study, the idea of “issue-oriented media platforms” is applicable only to Facebook activism.

“Issue-Oriented” or “Adaptive” Media Platforms?

The idea of issue oriented media platforms may not be complete if not re-introduced as “adaptive media forums.” The results of the interviews only partly supported the idea of issue oriented media forums. All the activists except one explained that they are going to keep their forums updated, and they are going to focus on other issues related to LGBT rights soon after the Civil Unions Bill becomes the law. One administrator expects to discontinue the forum soon after Civil Unions Bill becomes the law. This shows that a new media forum can be created particularly focusing on a single issue or a piece of legislation.

There are many issues related to LGBT rights. As some activists mentioned, Civil Unions is not the same as marriage even though it provides the partners some legal protection. Once Civil Unions become law many issues like property, health and insurance will come up as related issues. Moreover, activists focus on areas like elevating Civil Unions to marriage and safe schools. The focus of current “Civil-Unions-oriented” forums will shift towards marriage or another issue when the Civil Unions issue is addressed. Therefore, these forums adapt themselves to the issues that come to the agenda. The following comments illustrate the adaptive nature of new media forums:

“Yes, I think the constituency is [going to] keep growing, especially when we start getting into marriage. As long as there’s something out there people care about, and as long as we remain relevant people will stay involved. We’ll just have to explain to them why they should care.”

“We intentionally did our Facebook page as Equality Hawaii. We didn’t tie it into an issue because we knew that eventually Civil Unions was [going to] pass. Because every time the issue changes we have to change the name of the page. We intentionally keep it as Equality Hawaii Facebook and it’ll always be on whatever we’re working on. That was a conscious decision so that we don’t have to keep changing the name.”

“I would continue with it differently until in Hawaii they achieve marriage equality, and beyond achieving marriage equality there’s always the challenge of pursuing it. It’s not over with Neil Abercrombie signing the bill. You think you’re [going to] go to marriage but I’m telling you, you should be vigilant about protecting Civil Unions.”

“Those two pages are not going anywhere. None of the pages are called Civil Unions. They do transform to other issues, to other aspects of the community.”

Conclusion

This chapter provided answers to one side of the research topic. The discussion showed that new media performs multiple functions in the context of Civil Unions issue in Hawaii. New media tools have replaced methods like flyers, letters, and phone calls by providing activists with a set of interactive tools that bridges the gap between them and their constituents. For the respondents of this study, Facebook has been the most important tool during the Civil Unions debate. Activists have used new media tools during the issue for many purposes like getting the attention of people, educating them, shaping their opinions, archiving information, filtering information. This study further found that some activists have used new media tools in more advanced ways to make them integral components of constituent management systems. New media have bridged the gap between citizens and policy makers by providing the facility to testify online, and

to send messages to legislators throughout the Civil Unions debate. Another interesting observation in this chapter is that online participation facility might help minority groups to voice their concerns and provide their input in the policy making process. Finally, this chapter explained that new media provide the space to create adaptive media forums that can evolve to motivate public participation in LBGT issues.

Any public engagement effort is effective only if it affects the actual policy decisions. Legislators also have an active role to play in order to utilize new media tools effectively in policy making processes. Therefore, policy makers' perspective is also important to reach at conclusions on the role of new media in public policy. The next chapter turns to this topic.

CHAPTER 4: POLICY MAKING PROCESSES IN TRANSITION:

PERSPECTIVES OF LEGISLATORS

Introduction

New media's role in public participation cannot be fully understood without examining how it influenced legislators and the process of public participation. In the previous chapter, I showed how new media have provided the public with fast, cost effective and simple ways to interact with each other as well as with legislators. This chapter, conversely, will focus on how legislators perceive the rise of new media and how they felt new media affects policy making, particularly with respect to the Civil Unions issue in Hawaii. There are three results of the interviews on the legislators' side: 1) legislators are rapidly adopting new media applications, 2) new media increase citizen-policy maker interactions, and 3) new media activism has influenced the decisions relating to Civil Unions made by legislators.

Data analysis indicated that legislators are rapidly adopting new media even though it poses many challenges to them. Interviews with legislators showed that new media have helped increasing public participation online, as well as building citizen-policy maker interactions during the policy making process related to Civil Unions. The interviews further showed that new media have caused changes in legislators' decisions regarding Civil Unions at two levels. First, online testimony has affected the legislative decisions directly. Second, informal communications between citizens and legislators have affected legislators both negatively and positively.

Background of the Policymakers Interviewed

During interviews, seven legislators explained how they view new media and use different new media tools in policy making. Out of seven, three legislators have served in office for almost seventeen years and one has been serving for nineteen years. Two legislators interviewed have been engaged in policy making for nine years, and one for three years. This group of respondents included a majority leader, and a former Democratic Party Chair for one island. All the interviewees on the legislative side have been engaged with the policy making process related to Civil Unions in Hawaii. Among them, most of the respondents have conducted, or participated in, public hearings related to the bill (both HB 444 and SB 232).

Some legislators interviewed have been very active in introducing a policy related to Civil Unions in Hawaii. Some of them have worked with citizen groups to get the public engaged more with the process. As illustrated by the comment below, some legislators have helped citizens to organize themselves. One interesting fact revealed in this statement is that this senator has helped citizens to formulate an interest group and make a strategy to attract people toward their activism.

“In 2010, I helped [to] form one citizen group and developed the strategy for that which was to have mainstream community leaders. This year I have helped to coordinate leaders from the House and Senate and the Governor’s Office, and Attorney General’s Office to put together a bill that cleared up a lot of ambiguities. Some of those sections were included in the final bill.”

Civil Unions was a highly contested issue in Hawaii. The following statement shows the role one respondent played in the Civil Unions Bill. This legislator explained

that one hearing on Civil Unions lasted for 18 hours which was the longest hearing in Hawaii's legislative history.

“Four years ago, there was a bill in the House, and the Senate and the House h[e]ld a hearing, and they held the bill. Then three years ago the House sent the bill over early in the session in 2009 and then it was heard, and in the Judicial Committee there was a three-three tie. And then, there were those who attempted to bring the bill to the floor, and that failed.”

He further explained that he played a key role in pulling the bill to the floor after that failure. However, this attempt made at the end of the 2009 session also failed. The fact that Civil Unions is a highly debated issue, and that legislators have attempted to obtain citizen input on this issue makes this an interesting instance through which to examine public participation.

The above discussion provided some background information about the respondents on the policymakers' side. Below I discuss new media's role from the legislators' perspective. I discuss the new media use of the Senate of the State of Hawaii under the title “The State of Hawaii in Transition to a Paperless Legislature.” Then I discuss legislators' comments using four subtopics (1) new media's challenge for policy makers, (2) legislators' use of new media, (3) changing nature of public participation in the Facebook age, and (4) does new media activism “impact” policy decisions?

The State of Hawaii in Transition to a Paperless Legislature

This chapter looks at the role of new media in policy making on two levels. First, I explain communications between citizens and the Senate or the House of Representatives as legislative bodies. Second, communications between individual

legislators and their constituents can be considered a different level. Hawaii is the home to one of the most forward looking state legislatures in terms of the use of the internet and other forms of communications infrastructure. Paul Ferber and colleagues (2005, 89) ranked the Hawaii state legislature web site number one in the United States in terms of interactivity. The Senate of the State of Hawaii initiated a project on a “paperless senate” in 2008. As the Hawaii Senate Paperless Initiative page of the state legislature website mentions, the goals of the paperless senate initiative were: (1) “to enhance public access to the legislative process by making sure more documents are available in electronic format”, and (2) “to reduce paper waste generated by the Senate (Hawai‘i Senate, 2009a).” There are at least two outcomes of this initiative. First, on the public’s side, participation in the legislative process has become more accessible. This is because people can submit testimony via e-mail, and they can view all measures, committee reports, and testimony submitted on the state legislature website. The website also publishes hearing notices. On the legislator’s side, senators can work online on many activities related to policy decisions. Hawaii Senate Clerk’s Office reports that, “this initiative transformed chamber floor sessions so that by the end of our 2008 session, over 90 percent of senate members were solely using their Senate issued laptops to access interactive Order of the Day (OD) in their caucus discussions and on the chamber floor.”

The following statement shows how one senator thinks about the use of new technology:

“We’re a paperless senate. We’re with the cutting edge of technology for legislators. We’ve given social media a big part of how we communicate, so that we’re a much more transparent body.”

As noted in previous chapters, many people think that youngsters are more active in online discussions. Tools like Facebook and Twitter were not considered appropriate for policymakers. Hawaii Senate Twitter Usage Policy is evidence of the change of this attitude (Hawai‘i Senate, 2009b). Hawaii Senate Usage Policy provided guidelines for the use of Twitter micro-blogging during Senate committee hearings. The policy was expected to provide real-time information on hearings to all stakeholders. This shows that conclusions on the role of new media in public policy should be drawn with the understanding that the current environment is in a transition to an age in which electronic forms of communication dominate even in state agencies.

New Media’s Challenge for Policy Makers

New media offer legislators a range of new challenges. The rapid spread of misinformation is the main challenge highlighted by all legislators. The following comments show that the rapidity of the transmission of misinformation in new media makes legislators more cautious about their activities. One reason for legislators to be cautious is that new media provide the space for people to freely express their ideas about legislators and policy making. Information published in new media forums is not censored. As explained in the previous chapter, administrators of new media forums admit that self discipline is perhaps one way available to control the quality of information posted in their forums. Due to the absence of rules and regulations to maintain the standard of information, legislators think that it is a challenge to respond to comments made in new media forums by citizens. New media might provide the fastest ways to exchange information. It makes civic engagement and other related legislative processes efficient. However, misinformation also can spread through new media

instantly. This raises the issue of the reliability of information published in new media forums.

“With YouTube anybody is a producer, with the blogs anybody is a journalist. In a way it’s good but there’s a lot of nonsense. What if somebody goes viral, What if somebody posts something about you anonymously, and that’s not true.”

“Newspaper journalists have a certain ethical code, standard, you know verify your sources and be factual, otherwise you’re no longer a journalist. you’ll get fired. The challenge all of us have now is before when you read New York Times you can be sure that they were filtered, edited. With the blogosphere, people now have to find the right information, because there’s too much information. I think for policy makers, that’s going to be the challenge.”

“I think that certainly because of the internet we are under more scrutiny. I think that might have an impact on legislators. In the past people had made indiscreet remarks in public, some have made indiscreet remarks in public when they thought that a recording machine wasn’t on. Social media stuff also may be similar. But there’s more ability for a lot of people to see it as opposed to the past.”

“Because it’s so quick and rapid, it’s so easy for rumors or misinformation to spread. I think we saw a little bit of that. People were misinterpreting what the bill was. Once something becomes viral, it’s even harder to try to respond to that.”

Some legislators look at the same issue from a different perspective. They view new media as tools that might discipline them. As suggested in the following comments, the development of new technology has made policy makers cautious about what they say and do. The massive development of technology has provided people devices to capture or record anything happening in their environment and publish it in their Facebook, blog or web pages. A Facebook page that publishes a mistake made by a legislator might be the beginning of the end of his political career. Therefore, legislators have to be careful even in regular life. One important point one respondent highlights is that this might limit the extent of legislators’ expression of ideas about many issues. He stresses that this was particularly the case for Civil Unions as it is a highly debated issue in Hawaii.

“You’re at a party, you say something, and somebody ‘YouTubes’ it, your campaign is over. You can make one joke, somebody YouTubes it, that’s it. This is not a good thing, people are far more careful about what they say, and they end up saying nothing. If you say anything that might be little controversial, then it gets out there, and people start attacking you.”

“The challenge I think as a legislator is that social media distributes things so quickly. Everything we say and do can become news as a state senator or a state representative. So I’m very cautious about what I use it for and how I use it, because it clearly can become a bigger problem if you’re not careful about what you’re saying. So I think that’s kind of a challenge.”

Some policymakers mention that the rapidity of the spread of not only misinformation but also any kind of information poses challenges for policymakers. According to the following comments, it is a challenge for legislators to cope up with the speed of information transmission in the new media environment. As one legislator explained, citizens adapt new technology before legislators, and therefore, policymakers need to adjust their activities to the pace in which people work. One possible reason for the gap in the use of new media tools by citizens and legislative bodies is that governments need to make collective decisions as to how legislators should use new media tools in policymaking. It takes more time for a public agency to develop a framework of action to move towards new technology. However, legislators as citizens have the access to and the space to be active in new media. Although there might be the possibility that their busy work schedules do not provide them enough time to actively use new media, they can find some tools that may not disrupt their work life.

“In my generation, if I wrote you a letter I get response within one or two weeks, I would think nothing of it, because it takes time. Nowadays when e-mail started the person gets back to you in a day or two. Now with tweets you expect a response very quickly, within minutes may be. That’s a challenge because politics is not a quick business.”

“Governments move very slowly, technology moves very quickly. Trying to keep up is very challenging, and also trying to pass laws about governing the internet. [It is] very difficult to control that. We have a bill in this year about shield law.”

“From the legislators’ perspective it’s a challenge because in order for new media to be more effective, you have to be engaged in it, you have to be making posts or tweets on a regular basis. It does become a challenge for elected officials to really commit the resources. They start very early and they run very late, often times it’s face-to-face meetings and public hearings that we’re in. So, to try and get time to engage in new media is always a challenge. Second part of that is that because of the quickness in what you put up on social media and how it gets around I tend to be very cautious and careful about my postings.”

The following comment is related to a different dimension of the same issue. That is, some people might think that developments in new technology might invade their privacy. According to the following statement, legislators think that new media might influence the privacy of their lives. However, it is important to understand that not only legislators, but also any other person faces this issue. One careless statement made by an activist might end his political career.

“When I got first elected to the office there was bill that dealt with videotaping people. Now phones could take pictures. There’re challenges with someone without your knowledge taking a picture of you and then it’s on internet. We have to make laws about invasion of that kind of privacy.”

Institutional control is another challenge legislators face. As one legislator explained, some of her constituents have been unable to access her blog and Facebook page since organizations they work for have blocked some new media applications. Online social networks have mainly been perceived as forums for making friends, and exchanging “fun” information that are basically not considered professional. This attitude might have resulted in organizations blocking those networks. Therefore, legislators who use new media applications have the challenge of overcoming these difficulties. Another respondent mentions that the State needs to develop a policy to effectively use new media

in public policy processes. As he explained, the State Senate is particularly active in studying how other states use media in policy making processes and learning best practices from them. He mentions that if a proper policy on the use of new media tools is in place, legislators will be able to perform their duties to their constituents better.

Policy makers work on heavy schedules and they have to be engaged with many activities in the policy making process. These activities include meetings, public hearings, writing, talking to the public and even managing the work of his or her office. One legislator explains that for some policymakers new media might be disruptive as it provides people access to legislators at any time, even when legislators do not expect the public to get involved. Legislators work on many pieces of legislation and therefore they have a limited time to focus on a specific measure. Therefore, it is a challenge for them to answer the questions asked by citizens and reply on the citizens' comments consistently.

The challenges discussed above show another aspect of the new media usage. That is, legislators, as individuals, begin to realize the mismatches between their working styles and people's behavior in the new media space. This is a positive step because understanding challenges is important to meeting them. It is also important to identify best approaches to use new media in policymaking processes.

Legislators' Use of New Media

Amidst all the challenges explained above, legislators have been using new media to a significant extent to interact with citizens or interest groups. E-mail has been the main communication tool for all the respondents. As for other applications, Twitter is the most popular facility used by most of the legislators interviewed. Twitter has been more

comfortable than Facebook because it facilitates only tweeting. Some legislators think that they can scan tweets on their mobile phones even though they are busy. Facebook is more complex than Twitter as it performs multiple functions. Blogs and personal websites are even more complex as a person has to design the website. Legislators choose simple new media tools as these more closely match with their busy lives. The following comment illustrates how one legislator thinks about Facebook and Twitter.

“I have a Facebook and it’s more complicated. In Facebook you have to be a member, it’s more personal, and you have to spend more time. I don’t have that time. In Twitter I can scan.”

One legislator explains that her re-election hinged on the Civil Unions bill. She explains that she started some of her new media activities particularly during the Civil Unions issue. She thinks that her Facebook and Twitter campaigns helped her immensely to keep her constituents updated about what she was doing.

“My re-election in 2010 hinged on this bill [Civil Unions bill]. My opponent challenged me because I supported the bill and she did not. It was during this campaign that my volunteers created my Twitter and election Facebook sites. I also relied heavily on my campaign listserv and my campaign blog.”

All the respondents agree that either they have to switch to new media as it is the future, or everybody should learn how to use new media tools as they provide them with advantages that no other tool can offer. However, most of the legislators think that they still need to develop approaches to use new media. As for their individual use of new media tools, legislators provide mixed answers. Most of them mention that younger legislators tend to use Facebook and Twitter more than others. However, even older legislators seem to move rapidly towards new media very quickly. The following are

some statements made by older legislators about the profile of legislators who use new media.

“I would say, chronologically, some of us older dogs don’t use it as much as the younger ones. Almost everyone uses it. It’s really grown, especially after the last election. I don’t know exactly who does and doesn’t use new media. Most of the younger legislators are using Twitter and Facebook. I’m an old guy. I go online.”

“I do think I’m going to have to use social media more and more in the future, and part of the challenge is going to be, I have an older district. It’s not Waikiki for example. Most places you have a lot of apartments, and they are renters. And they tend to be younger. You know, people of 20 years don’t buy a house. Most places you have single homes, they tend to be older. They are like my father, and they don’t have even a cell phone, they’re not comfortable.”

“In general younger generation feels more comfortable with social media. It’s quicker. Obviously, I’m [going to] have to increase my outreach using social media.”

Some legislators use new media innovatively to get the public engaged in policy making processes. As shown by the following statements, some legislators are keen to adapt new technology in their work. Some of them have conducted “Twitter Town Hall Meetings” and some are planning to do “Facebook Town Meetings.” Public participation might increase with the emergence of “electronic town meetings.” This is because, as explained in the previous chapter, people will be able to participate in meetings even though they are unable to join the meeting physically. This might give them a sense that they are more connected to policymaking processes, and motivate them to formally testify. Another interesting idea provided by one senator is that they are currently thinking about using video streaming technology for public hearings.

“[New media usage] depends on how much the senator wants to get involved. Some are very much at the cutting edge. One of our senators did the first Twitter town hall meeting. It took one hour and talked specifically about the subject matter she chairs. It was a real success.”

“[One] senator wants to do a Facebook Town Hall, and also we’re looking into Ustream, utilizing that as well. I issue tweets every day, usually 3 to 8 tweets a day. We’re still establishing policies. Because it’s generally the wild wild west going on. So what is the appropriate level? What you’re tweeting from the floor, certainly you shouldn’t be tweeting anything in our caucus which is where we hash stuff out.”

Some of the most interesting evidence of how active and forwarding looking legislators are comes from one senator who suggests that public participation should be brought to such a level that citizens can testify via Skype, Ustream or any other online video chat facility. He thinks that new media are the best tools that bridge the gap between legislators and the public. Following are some of his comments on how they used new media recently:

“I’ve been one of the active senators in terms of use of social media to try and improve public access. For example Senate Ways and Means Committee is using Twitter to allow to track where we are in public hearing. Sometimes we have public hearings that go six to eight hours. I have a staff that uses Twitter to just trying to inform the public where we are in the agenda.”

“Two weeks ago, for example, we had a hearing where we had decision making on 75 bills on a wide range of things like taxes, tax credits, social programs, and health program. We were sending out tweets about where we are in the agenda, what decisions are being made, what bills are being passed. Twitter is kind of limited. So weren’t fully explaining what the bills were. But if you had downloaded the agendas, you would know what the bills are about and at least you could follow where the committee was.”

Although new media tools can be used to bridge the gap between citizens and legislators, the extent to which legislators respond to those queries, comments, or petitions should be examined carefully. A state has to decide the degree to which it should open up policy making process for the public through new media. Failure to provide equal participation opportunities for all interested citizens might result in frustration

among people. Moreover, once a citizen provides an input, he might expect a response from the decision maker. One of the main issues faced by legislators today is that they are not certain about how they respond to citizens in today's interactive new media environment.

“If you have too many people, then there's a lot of frustration on the participants' part. Because, to get to every question and every query becomes a challenge because of the nature, and who can participate, all of that kind of stuff. It's been an interesting time. I think most legislators are still trying to figure out what's the best use.”

The discussion above reveals how legislators perceive the rise of new media and how it influences their duties. Accordingly, I conclude that policymakers are rapidly adopting new media. This happens at two levels. First, the Senate as a regulatory body is moving towards new media. Second, legislators have been using new media tools individually in their campaigns. According to legislators, Twitter has been the most important tool during the Civil Unions issue as it has been the best tool to send short messages to the mobile phones of thousands of people. Some legislators think that people were kept well updated about the senate decisions throughout the whole debate. Some legislators mention that Facebook is also a great tool as it publishes the links to electronic testimony.

Changing Nature of Public Participation in the Facebook Age

In this section I discuss how the nature of public participation changes with the rise of new media. In the previous chapter, I explained the same issue from the activists' perspective. Looking at this issue from the legislators' perspective is also important to answer the main research question as it provides a more complete picture. Citizen-

policymaker interactions can be explained at two basic levels. First, public participation (e.g. oral or written testimony) is the most formal way legislators obtain input from the public. It is an important part of the legislative process. Second, public participation is only one aspect of citizen-policy maker interactions. New media provide informal input to legislators that might affect their decisions related to legislation. Increased interactions between legislators and their constituents might result in constituents participating formally, joining an interest group or even leading a group.

New media change formal participation at two levels. On the one hand, new media tools can increase submission of testimony online. On the other hand, new media can be used to motivate conventional public participation (e.g. public hearing, citizen panels). As explained in the previous chapter, activists use new media to motivate people to submit testimony online. With the relative ease new media provides citizens to testify, more people might tend to submit testimony. Confirming this idea, all legislators explained that the number of citizen participants has increased tremendously with the introduction of online testimony. The following comments depict how senators explain the change in the nature of public participation:

“I think social media has made that there has been more people submitting testimony. With the advent of computers, and the internet, the ability of people to type out a message and send out has increased. That’s where a lot of increase in participation comes. In Civil Unions debate we get thousands of e-mails. They’re all pretty much forms. On a computer you can just type in your name, and some groups send it out to us, to all the legislators.”

“There’s a big difference [in the way legislators obtain information from the public compared to the situation ten years before]. Before, if someone wants to send a letter to legislators, if they want to share their opinions with a legislator, you have to type a letter or testimony, and mail it. Today you can put ‘allreps’ or ‘allsens’ and they can send it so all of us automatically. It’s a challenge, in our office we give priority to people from my district.”

“It’s astounding, I think the ability to be there without really being there, the ability to participate civically, which is really what we want. But that’s a whole world. We’re [going to] start to get our arms around it so that we establish rules on how to engage.”

“The Senate went paperless two years ago. We get e-mails from people submitting testimony, e-mails for constituent requests and constituent response. I probably communicate with constituents more via e-mail than snail mail. Things have definitely changed in terms of how communities decide to communicate.”

With the introduction of online testimony, and interactive websites that publish documents related to the measures, the process of public participation has been made more visible to citizens. This facility has also reduced some costs for citizens. For instance, time spent by participants in a hearing session has been greatly reduced with the introduction of Twitter updates sent by the legislature. Similarly, online testimony has reduced some monetary costs for participants. Rowe, Marsh and Frewer (2004, 93) suggested nine criteria (1) representativeness, 2) independence, 3) early involvement, 4) influence, 5) transparency, 6) resource accessibility, 7) task definition, 8) structured decision making, and 9) cost-effectiveness) that can be used to assess effectiveness of public participation. On this basis, I argue that new media might increase the effectiveness of public participation. However, this idea should be studied further because this evidence is not sufficient to reach a valid conclusion. The following comments illustrate how new media increase the effectiveness of public participation.

“For those who want to participate, it provides them the immediacy that they never had before. We can probably hear from a constituent right before we go to the committee, while we’re in committee, and they’ll respond immediately following the committee. They’ll know how we vote immediately which gives them the opportunity to respond immediately.”

“The transition has been tremendous. When I first got into office, we didn’t have computers and networks. We’ve kind of advanced internally. We’re now really

paperless. We publish and we provide public access to virtually all of the legislative documents so that anyone in the community who wants to engage can not only get hearing notices, they can get testimony. They can see not only their testimony but other people either testifying for or against.”

“Twitter simplifies the process of hearings by allowing people to do other work and come on time for the bill they’re interested in. More and more people are showing up to hearing and things like the Ipad allow them to be tweeting from the hearing. I was telling my colleagues that we’re better off trying to embrace the technology and try and understand how it works. We can use it to better serve our constituencies. The legislature now is a lot more engaged and willing to experiment than it was 10 years ago.”

“New media has been able to bring citizens ideas faster to us. It really does give citizens a tool to participate as long as the legislators are willing to engage, and I think most legislators want to engage the public. The challenge is balancing it. I do say that we get more input on issues than we used to. Sometimes it does get overwhelming, my inbox is overflowing.”

An important question about the changes in the ways legislators communicate with their constituents might relate to how effective those new methods are as opposed to the old methods (face-to-face meetings, phone calls, and letters). Some legislators still think that the old ways still dominate. However, they seem to think that e-mail is already socially established compared to Facebook and Twitter. As shown in the following example, the only house representative interviewed includes e-mail in the list of old ways. This signals that people’s perception of information technology has been changing so quickly that people today might consider new modes of communication a part of mainstream communications infrastructure.

“The old ways still dominate. Face-to-face meetings, phone calls, and letters, and now e-mails. This year, I noticed that in particular, advocates were able to generate hundreds of e-mail[s]. It was the same words. But they came from all over. Before, that’d be difficult.”

The Representative interviewed mentions that although the State should provide citizens the access to the policy making process, it has to be controlled to avoid

unnecessary disruptions. Processing and reading citizens' messages takes a considerable amount of time. Moreover, as given in the following example, citizens might change their testimony and other messages if they are given all the testimony before the hearing. This might cause citizens submitting multiple messages to the legislators.

“I'm sure for some people [new media] is disruptive. One example, our hearings, before, all those you had was a file folder that had all those testimony. If you wanted to see it, you have to make a copy and look at it. Today the senate, they will post the testimony before the hearing. The house, as a matter of policy, we don't do that. We post testimony online after the hearing. The reason for the house policy is, see if you support a bill, you go online and you see the testimony of the opponents. Before the hearing you'll probably change the testimony to respond to that.”

New media can also increase informal communications between policymakers and citizens. This study suggests that policymakers today think that new media are essential tools for communicating with people. Informal communication between policymakers and citizens provides at least two advantages for both parties. On the one hand, legislators become more aware of public opinion. On the other hand, increased communications with policy makers might keep people engaged with social issues, motivating public participation. I pointed out in the previous chapter that new media have offered superior communication solutions to activists, considering techniques such as flyers, letters and telephone calls. These solutions facilitate citizen-citizen as well as citizen-policymaker communications. This idea can be further supported based on the interviews with policymakers. The emergence of new media has elevated public-policy maker interactions to such a level that some legislators think that the absence of new media might hamper their ability to communicate with citizens.

“I don't think there's a legislator out there in the US that can do their job without the use of new media, for example, by using email, smartphones, blogs,

Facebook, Twitter, etc. It would severely hamper my ability to communicate with my constituents without using new media.”

“People can reach me. They can text me. They didn’t have these tools back then. I remember two decades ago when fax machines came in, they were like ‘wow.’ We don’t use fax anymore. We e-mail. People can e-mail me.”

“I’m a product of the evolving legislative process. Prior to my coming in we used paper, a lot of it. The new process is so efficient and so streamlined. With social media you can find people right away or you can say something to thousands of people instantly. It’s changed even the pace of campaigns.”

The following examples show how legislators explain the ways citizen-legislator interactions have changed during last ten years. According to them, new media have impacted informal communications between policymakers and the public in a number of ways. The interactions have increased considerably between these two parties. In addition to contacting via email, legislators can use techniques like online polls and surveys to have an idea about the public opinion towards a particular legislation. One policymaker works with a few interns to develop a system to measure citizens’ ideas online. The following example shows that new media have provided legislators with tools to have a better idea about the public opinion.

“It has made a dramatic change as far as how quickly communication can be accomplished between citizens and legislators. I carry my iPhone everywhere so I get calls, emails, and texts from citizens on a constant basis. In the past many of these communications would have occurred too late to make an impact.”

“ I think what it’s doing is allowing citizens that may not be able to come in person for whatever reason to be able to communicate with us, which is different, and it’s new, and it’s exiting and it kind of brings down the [barriers to] law.”

“What social media allows us to do is to, in a limited fashion, is poll. It gets us the opportunity to poll in an inexpensive way. Polling is a big process. And it’s a science. My assistant provides certain services that include graphs of polling which will give us a better sense of where the constituents, at least in this particular landscape, are. We ask, ‘HB 444, what do you think?’ We can get the numbers. One thing that we don’t quite know, may be we do, is how many people are actually dealing with new media. Is it 10%? 20? 40%? of the voter

population. If it's up in the 50s, we're really [going to] get a big attention. It gives us the chance to formulate things.”

As explained above, new media have developed tremendously within past ten years, causing changes in public-policymaker interactions. Therefore, we could expect changes in the profile of citizens who actively engage in policy making processes. In the previous chapter, I explained that new media activists do not have a clear idea about the changes in their constituency. This is the case on the legislators' side also. Questions on how legislators perceive the changes in citizen participants during last ten years provided mix results. Some legislators mentioned that they do not have a clear idea about the profile of citizen participants, and some mentioned that there are changes in participants. The following statements show that policymakers do not have a clear idea about the changes in the profile of citizen participants. The idea that young citizens might be attracted to public participation cannot be supported as legislators do not provide a strong idea about the changes in participants. According to the following comments, some legislators expect new media might bring new people to testify. However, they do not have any evidence to prove that.

“I guess that comes in sort of waves of young people get[ting] involved at particular points in time. I think that [with] new media, certainly there's an opportunity to observe what's going on.”

“More and more people are showing up in hearings, and things like the ipad allow them to be tweeting from the hearing.”

“I think it's currently still growing and I think it'll continue to grow.”

“We're hoping that it brings youngsters into civic engagement. Certainly, not for a revolution. But we're finding out that Facebook users are older. The growing age group is older more in social media, and for a lot of our users that are responding right now, they're 30 and above. However, we're also trying to engage the use with high school. One senator ran a kind of a pilot with a high

school and she was using Ustream to communicate with them. So we're engaging as well. We're at such the beginning level and we can only go up from here."

"I would've expected more young people. But I haven't really seen much."

The above results show that new media increase citizen- policy maker interactions. At the formal level, electronic participation is a good example for increased communications between citizens and the Senate. Although this study does not provide specific evidence of the nature of new media's effect on conventional participation, it can be concluded that new media broadly increases conventional participation.

The discussion on legislators' perception and usage of new media completes one essential condition which is needed to be satisfied to explain specifically the role of new media in Civil Unions debate. That is, not only activists, but also legislators consider new media activism seriously. New media's role in public policy cannot be explained in a broader sense if policy makers are not in the new media age. The Hawaii legislature has developed to a level at which legislators might have been significantly influenced by new media.

Does New Media Activism "Impact" Policy Decisions?

One key question in answering the role of new media in public policy is "has new media activism impacted the policy decisions related to Civil Unions?" This question can be answered at two levels. At one level, new media exert a significant impact on policy decisions as it has been the platform for the submission of online testimony. All the legislators interviewed mentioned that all that testimony is given attention in making decisions related to the policy. In this case, the majority of testimony was sent online, and

therefore, the system of new media was the platform on which the highest degree of formal public participation took place. On this basis, I claim that new media increase public participation if the State provides citizens the opportunity to participate online. However, policymakers may need to be cautious when introducing electronic avenues of public participation. I highlighted in the previous chapter that people can “multiply” themselves in the virtual environment, by creating many profiles under different names. This raises the issue of reliability of representation. Policymakers may need to address this issue when developing platforms for electronic participation. Although the most citizens participated online, a significant number of people testified orally. The following comment shows that one public hearing on Civil Unions took eighteen hours.

“At the time of the hearing, it was 18 hours, and there’re different ways people can testify. Most people testified online. A couple of hundred people came here and testified in person.”

At another level, which is more informal, those who rally in support of or against the bill have sent thousands of messages to legislators which might have an impact on decisions related to the bill. They organized many events like protesting campaigns, sign waving, and marches to motivate people to actively support or oppose Civil Unions. Questions that focused on the impact of those messages and other activities on the decisions of legislators provided mixed results. Although some legislators think that new media tools helped them, some seem to believe that their decisions cannot be changed by such activism. The following statements show how some legislators view the impact of political activism on their decisions. According to these statements it seems that some legislators have their own positions which may not be influenced by the public opinion.

“I am sure that both the supporters and opponents of the bill used new media a lot. It did not affect me personally since I had already taken a position on the bill.”

“I receive their messages. I’m on the list. I’m not sure if it influenced. I’m always for it. It never increased or decreased. It didn’t affect me. But it’s a great assistance to me. We got thousands of messages.”

“I normally don’t look at the blogs unless there is a particular reason. I don’t follow like a blogger of Civil Unions. To that extent that didn’t impact my decision to support Civil Unions. I’ve been supportive of this many years prior to this, I mean current passage of the bill.”

Similarly, according to the first comment below, one respondent explains that he already had a predisposition on the issue of Civil Unions. However, he mentions that new media allow him to know the feelings of their constituents. As he mentions, the main idea that he can take out of the conversation about new media is that they help in his work. This is a more positive response because this legislator does not jump to the conclusion that new media do not impact his decisions. For those policymakers who already have positions on an issue, new media messages may provide information that help confirm their positions. Moreover, as illustrated by the second comment below, new media messages help a legislator to make sure that he or she understands the concerns of his or her constituents. This evidence shows that new media can help legislators to be more confident about the decisions they make.

“I guess what would probably have impacted me is not the number, but the content. I already had a predisposition. I mean I already had it decided in my mind. What’s important for me in this social media aspect is not necessarily the amount of tweets that I get, but the content and the nature of the messages I receive. Social media allows us to converse with our constituents, learn more about their feelings, and in a greater picture it allows us to be more efficient about the process of governance.”

“[In their messages] they put names and addresses. So I know which ones are my constituents. It was influential in the sense that I knew they were real life people

in my district who wanted me to vote for it. These media increased interactions between me and my constituents.”

These responses indicate that new media activism has not been able to change the decisions of legislators. However, it seems that some legislators are sensitive to the information exchanged in new media. One senator provided one interesting example of new media’s influence at an informal level on policy decisions. This example shows how informal communications between legislators and their constituents have negatively affected policy decisions. This can be seen as a negative side of new media activism. According to the following example, legislators work with a broader idea on the policy process and they might make short term decisions with a long term focus. These short term decisions may not be in the best interest of constituents even though these decisions support the legislative change they expect. Constituents’ responses to short term decisions might affect the long term focus of legislators. One important feature of new media is their ability to facilitate anonymous comments. These comments may be negative or positive. Sometimes, they might be sensitive. The following example clearly shows that some legislators have changed their minds after new media activists spread negative messages about them. In the discussion on the nature of information in new media in the previous chapter, I explained that activists can openly lobby for their positions, and use sensitive and subjective statements to attract citizens to participate. Although it is viewed positively in that discussion, the following example shows that the “freedom” in new media space might cause negative results when used in uncontrolled ways. These examples also support the argument that self-discipline may not be the best way to control activities in the new media environment.

“I was [in one key position] in the Senate for the past three years. Two years ago

we had received the bill from the House, HB 444, and I held the hearing, and you know we had 18 hours on testimony. I guess my committee voted three-to-three, which generally means that the bill dies. One of the senators were just [going to] vote. But he changed his mind before the hearing started, after we had set up the arena. Then the only way you could go after that is to pull the bill out of the committee and go to the floor for a vote. The second, we weren't clear that the Governor was [going to] veto the bill and we weren't clear that the house had enough votes. One of my colleagues wanted to make a motion and pull the bill. He insisted on having a vote. He put it to the floor, and the bill lost. We all voted against it because we needed more time to shore up support we have in the House, so we can override.

Because of the vote, not to pull the bill out of the committee on to the floor, advocates for the bill, they got all upset and started attacking us on social media. There was YouTube stuff on me, and hundreds of e-mails saying I'm a coward, I'm a liar, [and] I'm a betrayer. And they also sent them to other members who voted who was supportive of the bill but said that this wasn't done in the proper time. So a number of senators got upset and I guess there were some comments of personal nature to some of the senators. Because of that they conveyed to me that they would not vote for the bill on override. They would vote to pass it out but they wouldn't vote to offer the bill. We loss the override in the Senate. Nobody expected the backlash from the advocates through social media. A couple of our member said they were not [going to] support override. So we had to go and talk to them."

Legislators are well aware of new media groups that oppose or support the bill.

Although some legislators think that their decisions are not affected by the activities of new media groups, they do not look at them negatively. Instead, they seem to think that those activists are helpful to some extent to make effective policy decisions. New media help activists to inspire people to participate and contact policy makers. Following are three different ideas related to the volume of messages legislators receive through new media. These ideas show the receivers' side of the messages. There are three themes emerging. First, legislators are getting used to the heavy volume of messages. Two, even though the volume is too high, numbers are important for legislators to have an idea about the number of people that oppose or support Civil Unions. Three, not only are numbers important, but also legislators expect messages with important content. This

evidence shows that even though activists may not be able to change the opinion of legislators, they might be able to give legislators a sense of confidence to make decisions.

“I would say yes, [new media activists] are influential [in policy decisions]. They help us. I think to some extent the volume is too much. We’re getting used to the volume of that.”

“Certainly the numbers are important, but in terms of legislation and how we do stuff here, you need to kind of get into the substance. You need to see what people are saying, you know, ‘what is the problem with this idea? or what is the good part of this idea?’ rather than 2000 people saying ‘pass the bill.’”

“[New media activists] give us a sense of what people are thinking. I guess some legislators are impacted by what they think are many people being for or against something. They’re more impacted by how many people in their district are e-mailing them, sending Twitter feeds and talking to them on the Facebook.”

“You know, probably a couple of years ago there was less participation, I mean there were less numbers generally. But now, because of the newness of it, ability of people to exercise it, we expect a lot of stuff. Advocates use new media to motivate people. The impact of it is I think we use to get petitions from thousands of people. I think it depends on the issue.”

Legislators believe that activists use new media in smart ways to get people engaged with the Civil Unions debate. Although policy makers used new media tools during Civil Unions debate, they think that advocates used Facebook, Twitter and other tools more and in smarter ways than them. One legislator highlighted that new media are probably the main set of tools used by activists and they used new media extensively to contact policy makers.

“I think that the community that supported it and opposed it did a lot of social media. I’m sure that for more savvy participants, they [are going to] locate the senators or the representatives that have their Facebook pages, or they’re [going to] tweet them or whatever. If you’re savvy politically, you want to see this go, then you’ll find ways to contact them through the social media. We got a lot of communications in social media, those that you were mentioning [Facebook, Twitter], overwhelmingly yes.”

“I know on the advocacy side, or the people getting engaged, I know there’s a lot more active ways that they use it to get followers and get people engaged with the legislative process. From our perspective, we see the outcomes, we see a deluge of e-mails either supporting or opposing different measures.”

“I’m sure during the hearings, people were tweeting, people were putting on Facebook what was going on. I’m sure that even though hearing starts at but your bill number is six on the agenda, by four o’clock there’re still on the other bills. How’d you know? Before, you had to call everybody. Now because of social media you can instantly tell them.”

Although policymakers consider new media messages supportive for them, most of the legislators interviewed think that the main function of new media is to organize people to participate rather than lobbying for policy changes. They think that it is a “public tool” and not the best tool to lobby for policy changes. This idea supports the argument in the previous chapter that new media could be called “citizen-based media” as they provide space for citizens to be more politically active. Legislators seem to think that it is the responsibility of legislators to develop platforms to get the public engaged in policy making. Legislators appreciate more if new media is used formally in those platforms rather than receiving thousands of messages with the same content from people.

“New media has been really useful for organizing but not necessarily for lobbying. I think the organizers should realize that for most of us, at least now, Facebook and all of that, it’s not similar to coming to our office and sitting down and talking with us. I think it’s an organizing tool.”

“Today advocates or opponents of any given issue are able to mobilize a broader base of people.”

Questions on new media’s impact on the nature of political activity and policy-making in the future provided mixed answers. Even though legislators understand that the internet is a tremendous invention that helps to increase public participation, they were

unable to explain in a broader sense how the nature of policy making and politics will be changed with new media. The following statements show how legislators explain new media's impact on policy processes in future.

“You know things like Facebook, everyone has a Facebook. Even if you're not on Facebook, they [want to] be your friend. It's like, everyone has a phone, and may be you also have to get one. So people go find out and learn how to use it. Politicians [want to] have good relationships with their voters. So, legislators in a way are forced to use social media. If you're not then you're out of the loop.”

“I've always tried to advocate that we're better off kind of embracing that technology. The mission really is providing better public access to the process. That's kind of the way that I do it. Some things work better than others. Twitter for example, we've been trying to deal with the issue of how to keep the public engaged, [e]specially with these long agendas. We have 10s and 50s of bills and for the public to come in at 8 o'clock in the morning and sit through 8 o'clock at night, it become torturous. Twitter to me is the perfect example of something that very inexpensively keeps people engaged. They can get the agenda. They can do other things until their issue of concern is before the committee.”

“I encourage my colleagues to embrace it. I think there has been a tremendous transition since we went to this paperless project. The staff people actually now believe that the senators want to understand and best utilize the technology in terms of trying to deliver better services to the constituency and the community. They're trying different things. A bunch of senators got ipads this time because it allows us to engage in, and it allows us to travel and it allows us to carry more information.”

One legislator explains that even though internet can bridge the gap between policy makers and the public, this facility should not be fully used in the future as direct democracy might not be the best form of democracy. He mentions that a good legislator's duty is not just to agree with the majority, but to make the decisions that are in the best interest of the community. Therefore he thinks that rather than using new media as a tool for direct participation, one way to use new media is to use it for public opinion research. Another respondent adds to this idea and mentions that a value system needs to be created for the internet and other new media devices like iphones and PDAs. For instance

a code of conduct that provides guidelines on how one should use new media and draws boundaries that would help to decrease the negative effects of misuse of new media would be important to use these tools effectively.

“One of the values in representative democracy is the whole notion that if you just wanted to go by popular vote on every issue, we have the technology today that you could actually do that, but founding fathers really did believe to some extent that representative democracy was better than direct democracy. To the extent that issues are becoming more and more complex, I do believe that part of job is really trying to understand what the issue is and then try and make my best judgment about what I believe to be in the best interest of the community. Sometimes, some people will always agree with me and some people disagree with me.”

“If there’s an internet value system, free market, transparency, no censorship, there’s an expectation of honesty and ongoing relationship.”

Based on the above discussion, the third idea that new media activism influences the decisions made by legislators can be approached from two perspectives. On the one hand this idea can be supported with the conclusion that new media influence policy decisions as it has directly increased formal (online) public participation. On the other hand, there is no clear evidence to support this idea if considered the informal impact of new media on the decisions of legislators. In other words, the impact of informal communications between legislators and citizens through new media on the legislative decisions is unclear as the interviews provided mixed results.

Conclusion

This chapter explained the role of new media in public policy from the legislators’ perspective. The discussion in the chapter shows that legislators have a sound understanding on the uses of new media tools and that they are switching gradually towards using new media more and more in their campaigns as well as in policy making

processes. The analysis further shows that new media highly increase citizen- policy maker interactions. Citizen- policy maker interactions with respect to policy making have increased at two levels with the rise of new media. First, the Senate as a regulatory body has started conducting public hearings online, which is a formal communication between the Senate and the citizens. Second, informal communications between these two parties have increased tremendously. Interview results partly support the idea that new media activism influences the decisions made by legislators. Submission of online testimony directly affects policy decisions as those testimonies are considered legal and formal. The impact on informal communications on policy decisions is not clear according to this study. Legislators seem to think that rallies do not change their positions on Civil Unions. However, the study highlights some instances in which informal communications have negatively affected policy decisions. This study further explains some other interesting findings. Even though Facebook is the tool most popular among activists, Twitter is the new media facility that legislators like the most. This is mainly because Twitter is less complex and easily accessible via mobile phones. The study explains some challenges faced by legislators with the rise of new media. There seems to be a time gap between the activists and legislators in terms of their use of new media. Activists claim that they are proactive while some legislators believe that governments are slower than citizens to embrace new media. It is important to identify measures to face the challenges posed by new media. As discussed in the previous chapter, some citizen groups have developed online systems that track the behavior of their members and perform multiple tasks with less effort. Legislators may also wish to develop better systems to track the behavior of online citizen participants and those citizens that interact with them through new media.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Introduction

This thesis provides insights into the role played by the modern new media in policy making processes. New media are relative. What is new today might be old tomorrow. This nature of new media makes it important to continuously study the emergence of new media tools and how the public socializes them. The media is always a political phenomenon. New media have a role to play in politics and policy. This study explains some important policy-related applications of current new media. The study answers the question “What role did new media play in policy making related to the Civil Unions Bill in the State of Hawaii?” As evidenced through ten in-depth interviews conducted with new media activists, new media have served as an interactive system of tools that activists used for motivating citizens to participate in the policy making process related to Civil Unions. According to the interview results, activists think that they were able to attract a considerably high number of citizens to participate electronically as well as via other forms of participation. Although legislators were trying to incorporate new media in the policy process, the speed of the communication, number of requests and queries, and the speed of the spread of information have been challenging for legislators during the policy making process. New media have contributed to influence policy decisions related to Civil Unions formally via online testimony as well as through informal communications between citizens and legislators. This chapter summarizes the conclusions reached in this study. Limitations of this study are also discussed while providing guidelines for further studies.

New media and Public Policy: Lessons Learned

The main suggestion of this study is that new media increase public participation by providing communications infrastructure for grass-roots level activists to organize people. Who uses this infrastructure to organize the public and how policymakers view the activities of those groups are two important questions to focus on. Therefore, this study analyzed in detail the ideas of administrators of new media forums and legislators about their use of new media during the policy making process related to Civil Unions in the State of Hawaii. Civil Unions in Hawaii is a highly debated issue. It is an issue in which public participation in the policy making process was very high. House Bill HB 444, known as the Civil Unions Bill, suggested extending the same rights, benefits, protections, and responsibilities of spouses in a marriage to partners in a Civil Union in the State of Hawaii. The bill was vetoed in the end of 2010 by the new Governor. Later in 2011, in the new legislative session the bill (SB 232) passed and it was signed by the Governor. This study's design was based on two main premises. First, online social networks have begun playing a central role in making interactive citizen groups. Second, public participation is an issue-based phenomenon. The public may not participate if an issue is of no relevance to them. Throughout two chapters, this study explained the views of ten activists who use new media to motivate people to participate and seven legislators who made decisions related to Civil Unions.

This study suggests that new media tools, particularly Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, can no longer be excluded from political and policy processes. Facebook and Twitter, which were considered platforms for youngsters, are entering into the tool box of adults. As revealed by the interviews, political activists extensively use these tools in

their campaigns. On the activists' side, interview results reveal two main levels of new media activism. First, during the Civil Unions debate, activists used Facebook, Twitter, websites, blogs and e-mail to motivate people to submit online testimony, petitions and other messages to policymakers. Second, these new media tools served as a platform for activists to organize their campaigns and rally in support or against a particular policy. However, one should not understand new media tools as substitutes or superior alternatives to television, radio or newspapers. According to the interview results, these applications should be considered public tools that can function as superior solutions to methods like flyers, snail mail and telephone.

The institutional and objective role of traditional media is not negated by new media. New media might expand the scope of traditional media as objective media forums can be established in the cyberspace to serve institutional purposes of the traditional media. The system of interactive new media tools has provided activists the space to create adaptive media platforms that perform multiple functions. These functions include providing information about an issue, examples of similar issues in other states and solutions given, updates of the policy making process, contacts of legislators and other people involved, links to the bills and testimony, sample testimonies, and sending action alerts. In general, new media have contributed to a massive increase in online testimony which could be a new aspect of public participation. This practice may help bring in the ideas of ordinary citizens for the policy making process. Although activists think that new media have helped them to motivate public for participation, they do not have a clear idea about the impact of their campaigns on conventional participation.

Each tool used by activists performs a different function. Facebook, for some activists, is a place to archive information related to an issue. For another, Facebook helps to send information without giving their constituents a sense of information overload. Twitter is basically a tool for sending short messages. Both Facebook and Twitter have mobile applications. Therefore, these two networks have provided activists incredibly accessible groups of constituents. YouTube and Flickr play somewhat different, and as found in this study supportive, roles. They are the places where people can upload videos and pictures which can later be linked to the main Facebook page or can be sent to Twitter or e-mail accounts as links. This study supports the idea that current new media could be considered “citizen centered media” that are run by regular citizens. They are cost-effective and accessible for an average citizen. When put in the policy context, new media could increase the effectiveness of public participation. New media reduce the costs of participation and make the process more visible. However, the State also has a role to play here by publishing relevant information online and opening up the dialogue in different online forums. As evidenced in this study more advanced uses of new media tools not only increase the efficiency of activists but also provide feedback mechanisms for them. A software application that connects all new media forums and provides the centralized control reduces the duplication of work. Such software will provide more power for the administrator to monitor the behavior of his members and assess the level of activity in the forum.

This study began with the idea that online networks like Facebook provide the opportunity to create “issue oriented media platforms” that help to gather information, motivate public participation and manage political campaigns. Interview results indicated

that these platforms can be not only issue oriented, but also adaptive depending on the changes in the issue. One should not understand adaptive media platforms in comparison with traditional media tools like newspapers or radio. Although some activists write informative pieces on different issues, the informational role of most new media activists has been limited to gathering information related to a particular issue. As one activist highlights, producing “meta content” is also an important function in politics. Making new content using existing information might contribute to gain public attention to the issue. In other words, the conflict could be made visible by arranging information in a theme. Adaptive media platforms go beyond traditional tools by actively lobbying for policy changes and working on the grass-roots level to influence policy decisions.

The roles of Facebook and Twitter are no longer limited to creating and keeping friendships. These applications are acquiring significant roles in state agencies. The Hawaii State Legislature is in a rapid transition towards using new media applications in policy making processes. The Senate is called paperless and the public hearing process has been expanded through electronic testimony. Some legislators have already started practices like “electronic town meetings”, and “Facebook town meetings.” The State Legislature website provides information related to various pieces of legislation. The State Legislature has already initiated practices like “Twitter Policy” that focus on using new media to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the policy making process. The fourth chapter explained that opening up electronic platforms has caused a significant increase in the number of testimonies submitted. Legislators’ decisions regarding a particular legislation can be changed both on formal and informal grounds. At the formal level, electronic testimonies have directly brought citizens’ ideas and concerns to the

legislators. At the informal level, citizen-policy maker interactions have increased tremendously with the rise of new media. Some observations made in this study showed that legislative decisions can be affected negatively by new media activism. The new media space does not, at least for now, control writers, bloggers and other activists. Therefore, they have the freedom to write almost anything on different forums. The subjective nature of those comments might affect formal legislative processes negatively. Activists think positively about the tremendous increase in citizen policymaker interactions. Although activists can send frequent messages to citizens, there is the issue on the legislators' side that frequent messages might disturb the smooth functioning of legislative bodies. Legislators need to understand this change carefully. The society has made the transition from letters to e-mail which considerably reduced the time taken to send and receive messages. Public agencies have already been accustomed to this change, at least in developed countries. Online social networks like Facebook and Twitter are attracting millions of people. These tools bring changes in terms of the way people interact with each other.

One's existence in Facebook or Twitter is somewhat problematic. A person could have multiple identities and "multiply" himself in the cyberspace. One person could be three "persons" in Facebook or Twitter. This gives legislators the challenge of how to control repeated participation online. Moreover, one does not need to be anonymous in the internet anymore. He can make any comment using a different identity which could make the online behavior of citizens unaccountable.

Limitations of the Study and Further Research

There are several limitations of this study. One limitation relates to the issue of validity. This study analyzes how activists and legislators perceive the role new media played in the Civil Unions debate. There might be differences between what was perceived by respondents and what happened. This study is missing a content analysis that analyzes the content of messages exchanged and information relating to the Civil Unions debate. Further, a content analysis could have analyzed the documents (that include all the testimonies submitted) relating to the Civil Unions policy posted on the State Capitol website. Another aspect of the validity issue is that this study does not explain the views of citizens. The public is a key element in participation. This study does not explain how influential new media were in the citizens' participation in policy processes. Therefore, future studies should examine the ideas of constituents on their use of new media tools. Those studies could focus on how citizen participants view how new media affected their participation. Next, the ideas analyzed represent mainly the views of those who rally in support of the Civil Unions. The only respondent from the opposition is a senator who voted against the bill. However, this could be considered a minor limitation given the fact that Civil Unions debate is only the vehicle to analyze new media use. In other words, political positions of new media activists may not significant differences in new media usage of activists. However, further studies could provide more compelling examples with the ideas from people representing different positions.

One major limitation of the study is that the findings cannot be used to form broad generalizations. Public participation is issue specific. One should not conclude that the results of this study are applicable equally in other settings. Civil Unions is a highly

debated issue in the United States. In Hawaii, the first public hearing related to Civil Unions lasted for eighteen hours which was the recorded highest in the history of the State. The main reason for selecting Civil Unions debate for this study is that, being an issue with high public participation, it provides the opportunity to reveal how far active citizens go in using new media tools. Although not generalizable into a particular theory, this study does provide some workable suggestions for future researchers to examine the role of new media in public policy.

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