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**SOPA DELIBERATION ON FACEBOOK:  
DELIBERATION AND FACILITATION OR MERE  
MOBILIZATION?**

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# **SOPA DELIBERATION ON FACEBOOK: DELIBERATION AND FACILITATION OR MERE MOBILIZATION?**

**Ray Wang**

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## **ABSTRACT**

While social networking sites have had a profound impact on political campaigning (Sweetser and Lariscy, 2008), research has overlooked its usefulness in policy deliberation. The recent defeat of the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) in the United States has been presented by the media as a victory for the people over big business through the uses of social media and the Internet, but was Facebook a means by which people could debate the merits of the Stop Online Piracy Act? Or was it merely a means of mobilizing people against the law at the expense of coming to a better alternative that addressed the issues of freedom, innovation, and copyright protection?

A content analysis of comments to U.S politician Facebook pages, (2 Pro-SOPA, 1 Anti-SOPA), revealed that there was little debate and discussion regarding the merits of SOPA, and the Facebook pages became more of a many-to-one mobilizing platform in which constituents frequently posted call to action responses rather than use it as a conversational tool between citizens and politicians. There was a little facilitation, and politicians were notably absent from discussions, and in the cases they did respond, it was only in a superficial way. The study highlights issues with current U.S e-democracy initiatives and calls for more specific definitions with regards to political engagement, along with a renewed focus on utilizing online forums for policy deliberation rather than just campaigning.

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## INTRODUCTION

'Don't mess with the internet'; that was a statement printed in the *New York Times* regarding the recent defeat of the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA), a policy that arose from the "formidable old guard" of big business to battle piracy that was battered down by the new Internet activists who rose up to challenge the legislation. Representative Zoe Lofgren said it was an important moment in the Capitol, and this was far beyond the mere competing business interests that normally dominate competing business interests. "This is individual citizens rising up," (Weisman, 2012).

While presented as an innovation in politics, such sentiments have been quick to be expressed before by scholars who have discussed how ICTs can enhance democracy (Coleman, 2001; Rheingold, 1992; Castells, 2007). A British MP believed that the Internet could cut out the middleman and allow citizens to input their views directly into the political spectrum (Coleman, 2001), and Castells noted political uses of the Internet had substantially increased and the numerous innovations such as Hotsoup.com, a website launched by political strategists, which better enabled citizens to connect with politicians.

However, despite initial enthusiasm, it should be noted that Hotsoup.com has since been shut down due to lack of activity, and many other e-democracy initiatives have floundered due to lack of clear objectives and unrealistic expectations (Chadwick, 2006). Just prior to the rise of the Internet, Tambini (1999) cautioned that the democratic potential of new media was still unclear, and empirical studies have shown that online political discussions have been plagued by trolling and flaming (Cammaerts and Audenhove, 2005). More problematic is the fact that while there is much literature that discusses the political potential of the Internet, it has not been well-defined. E-campaigning, e-government, and e-democracy have all been intermixed into one research tradition without any clear distinction between these radically different areas of politics (Yildiz, 2007). Recently, literature has become especially focused on the use of new media with regards to political campaigning (Sweetser and Lariscy, 2008; Smith, 2011; Baumgartner and Morris, 2009), and while this is an important development, it is not the only development that should be noted as the Internet becomes an increasing integral part of politics (Macintosh, 2004).

The United States has been at the forefront of various e-government initiatives in recent years. Not only has the country established e-rulemaking, or consultation sites for citizens to view proposed legislation and provide their feedback (Scholsberg, Zavetovski, Shulman, 2009), the U.S government also recently published the Facebook Hackathon report (2012), in

which technicians and politicians came together to discuss how to better integrate Facebook into politics. Among the next steps outlined in the report was “build[ing] an ongoing dialogue,” which emphasized a need to build a strong community to heal the relationship between the American public and their legislative institutions. While the Internet overcomes the time and space issues that traditional policy forums have faced (Guttman, 2011), new issues, such as fragmentation and polarization have arisen that hinder these online forums from fostering community (Sunstein, 2001; Habermas, 2006).

With regards to the Internet, Habermas (2006) stated that the democratic potential of the Internet was limited except in special contexts, and led more to fragmentation rather than creation of a public sphere. On the surface, the recent defeat of SOPA legislation seemingly disproves Habermas’ claim that the Internet is completely fragmented, serving as a prime example of the evolution in online policy deliberation, and proving with the rise of the Internet, government has become much more responsive and connected to the public. However has the proliferation of social networking sites such as Facebook truly created an ideal public-sphere-like environment to critically evaluate issues? Or is it merely a mobilizing tool to be used to politicians AND concerned citizens for the mere purpose of defeating “bad” legislation rather than resolving important issues in Internet regulation? The theoretical framework will incorporate the concept of the public sphere and various democratic theories, reconsider the arguments for/against the online public sphere theory, assess past e-democracy initiatives, and compare them to the new initiatives occurring on social networking sites such as Facebook.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the history of the United States, a major emphasis in creating good governance has been on nurturing a vibrant democracy. Two forms of democracy have been debated in the American tradition: Representative Democracy and Deliberative Democracy. Representative Democracy relies on representatives representing the people and their interests adequately, with people mainly doing very overt political actions such as voting (Chambers, 2002). On the other hand, deliberative democracy emphasizes people to be more active, and participate not just in voting but also in policy deliberation. In his discussion of representative democracy, Fishkin (2008) noted an initial emphasis on elite deliberation, but many viewed this as undemocratic and subsequently supported initiatives supporting more of a direct democracy approach, in which there was more of a “raw” opinion. Almond (1966) however, pointed out that interest articulation and aggregation on a large level was impossible due to

representatives being unable to account for the variety of different interests. Therefore, focus in research has been on providing ample opportunity for citizens to be involved in the process, and ensure all views can be voiced and heard. Dahl (1989, as cited in Held (2006), p. 310) listed five steps that a system must meet to be considered fully democratic. For this study on deliberation, special emphasis will be on the first two steps:

1. Effective Participation
2. Enlightened Understanding

While governments seem to have addressed the issues of effective participation and enlightened understanding through ICTS (Internet, computer, and technology systems), there are still numerous issues in civic affairs. Therefore, this issue of access to participation and real deliberative participation needs to be clarified further.

### **Deliberative Democracy and the United States**

The current state of civic affairs in the United States has been much scrutinized in recent years and many scholars pointed out disconnect between politicians and citizens. Robert Putnam (2000) in his work, *Bowling Alone*, noted the decrease in social capital in America, with people being less interested in civic responsibilities and more interested in their own personal gains. He noted only by rebuilding of social capital, through re-energizing civic associations, could the situation in America improve. However, Fung (2003) appropriately points out this could also lead to the proliferation of mischievous associations which come at the expense of social peace and civic sentiments, and cites Cohen and Rodgers (1995) who instead recommend institutional reforms that allow associations to participate cooperatively with officials in administration and policy-making, which is not unlike the call by many scholars for better connections between the citizens and their governments (Habermas, 1998; Davis, 2011). Benjamin Barber in his work, *Strong Democracy*, adds that the current state of democracy does not enable people to have any say, and their powerlessness comes not from apathy but from their powerless state (Barber, 1984, 272). There are two issues that need to be discussed further: disconnect between the political and social world (Chadwick, 2006) and access to information.

In summarizing the current debates about improving deliberative democracy in the United States, the general recommendations can be summarized by John Dewey, who argued for the creation of a great community when discussing the state of affairs in America in the 1920s. According to Dewey (1927), America needed to become a great community, and improved

communication was the only pathway to this goal. While Dewey stated improved communication was essential to improving governance, he also emphasized that this communication be in the form of an exchange between people and sharing of ideas and values, not there mere transmission of ideas to be banked. Also, in this great community, the people would all be included in this interaction. With the relatively inclusive nature of Facebook, the study will look at the quality of the interactions on this social networking site with regards to policy deliberation in the United States.

### **E-democracy**

With the proliferation of new media, governments have been trying to integrate new media into their daily operations to improve efficiency as well as their interaction with the public. Tambini (1999) stated that integration of new media into governance was essential to determining the new media's democratic potential, and Sassi (2001) similarly said that online discussions should be better integrated into formal political procedures. Since then, much research has been done in the area of e-government. While there are indications that these initiatives have been successful in some areas, such as making government operation more efficient and providing access to government documents (Kent and Taylor, 2002), there are still issues with the quality of the interactions between politicians and constituents.

Scholars have found that new technology did not connect politicians and constituents in a way that enhances deliberative democracy. Davis (2008) in a study of British MPs, noted that parts of Parliament were still disconnected from their constituents despite the integration of new technology. Coleman (2005) also noted that despite the proliferation of new technology, citizens still neither knew nor were ever contacted by their MPs. In a discussion of the developments of e-governments around the world, Chadwick and May (2003) noted that e-government could have three different forms: managerial, consultative, and participatory. In case studies of the United States, Great Britain, and the European Union, they discovered a surprising lack of participatory models utilized among the three cases, with all of them relying on a more managerial approach.

Research has also revealed that while congressional websites makes access to government easier in some respects, interactive features that helped stimulate such dialogical discussions are still quite rare on these sites (Hale, Musso, and Weare, 1998; Kent and Taylor, 2002). The United States recently attempted a different form of e-government called regulations.gov, a government run website which enabled citizens to comment on proposed legislation. However, results showed that this consultation initiative did not necessarily make people more deliberative about the issues (Schlosberg, Zavetovski, Schulman, 2009).

In fact, interactions between politicians and constituents have also been more superficial than substantive. In her discussion of interactivity, McMillan (2008) notes that despite its perceived simplicity, interactivity on a computer can mean a variety of different things, including user to user interaction, user to computer interaction, and user to documents interaction. With the ambiguity of the term interactivity, McMillan concluded research would benefit from utilizing a specific definition of the term. The issue is especially pertinent to the issue of political interactions online. Reconsidering regulations.gov, while people can interact and access government documents, the website does not necessarily stimulate conversation among citizens and politicians, and while people do have access to other comments, they are never actually interacting with other people, just the documents. The ways users can interact with politicians regarding this legislation is limited. Regulations.gov resembles more of simple email service that does not emphasize conversational exchange. While email is interactive to an extent, it does not inherently create conversational exchange.

Though the U.S government has pushed to connect with the public on a more personal level, it has not been successful due to the nature and frequency of their interactions. A Performance Review report in 1993 recommended that the government treat its citizens more like customers (Chadwick and May, 2003). However, this emphasis on consumer interaction can also create problems. An area of interest has been describing this real digital divide between citizens and consumers with the rise of marketplace ideals. While the concept of the customer seems to improve government interactions with the people, Gandy (2006) notes this real digital divide that exists between people's identity as consumers and citizens and the divide will only widen with new media as the needs of the audience as citizens are discounted in favour of their needs as consumers. Couldry (2004) adds research has separated the consumer and the customer without considering the fact that these two elements that make up people have always influenced each other. Kuttner (1999) says market principles do not always offer solutions towards creating a vibrant democracy. Applying this concept further, the real digital divide is created not just through elitist programming motivated primarily by Market ideals as Gandy suggests, but also through the superficial interactions and mobilization responses that politicians can now utilize online to garner votes and support.

Building off this point, it is erroneous to therefore assume that government officials are treating people as citizens and always stimulating political discussion. Constituents could just as easily be treated as commodities, with politicians using these interactions as public relation exercises in which the discussion are stifled so as not to risk their standing (Bruns, 2008). Scholars have pointed out this interactivity façade, where politicians provide the tools



for interactivity to constituents but don't actually take in any feedback from these systems, with support subsequently waning (Stromer-Galley and Baker, 2006). Coleman (2011) noting that governments needed to be clear on what listening entails, and could risk generating scepticism and cynicism regarding such exercises if they were not genuine. Coleman also noted a big difference between e-petitions and meaningful exchange of views. While governments have emphasized access through means such as providing emails and establishing connections with constituents through social networking sites, all of which have reduced the cost of communication between citizens and government, this still does not fit the ideal Dewey championed of the great community, in which people exchanged ideas and values in conversation with one another.

There have been signs of progress despite the pessimism regarding the contributions of new technology to deliberative democracy. Contrasting the above examples is the success of the Minnesota e-democracy initiative (Dahlberg, 2008), which used a similar e-mailing system to regulations.gov, but was created in such a way that it turned the e-mailing list into a deliberative forum. Therefore, to move forward, the study will not only look at the quality of the interaction between citizens and politicians about the SOPA bill to explore whether the Facebook environment promoted deliberation, like the Minnesota e-democracy initiative, or it did not, following a similar trend of other studies that investigated online political discussions.

In addition, to move forward, the study will look at the way discussion was facilitated and developed over time. Gutmann (2011) noted that while some feared facilitation would interfere with deliberation and warned that a facilitator could have a big influence on the process, many welcomed the role of the facilitator in the process. Perez (2008) adds that such facilitators, or political intermediaries, might be helpful in coping with the cognitive deficits people have in processing the wealth of information available to them. Allowing these intermediaries to develop and thrive could be a key to dealing with political issues in the information age. To summarize, political deliberation need political intermediaries as well as proper rules and guidelines. While establishing rules and guidelines seems very straightforward, there has actually been much debate on how to determine acceptable forms of speech in the public sphere.

### **Public Sphere: Acceptable forms of expression and inclusion**

The debate about the public sphere has been argued from two conflicting viewpoints: rational consensus and agnostic pluralism. Rational consensus, the idea of people coming to agreement through rational debate, was first popularized by the Habermas (1989). However, Mouffe (1999) and Dahlgren (2005) both state that such an emphasis on rational consensus would discount the other valid forms of expression only on the basis that it was not rational, with Dahlgren noting the poetic, the humorous, and ironic communicative modes are forms that are not necessarily rational but equally valid forms of speech in democracy. Such emphasis on certain forms of expression would also create elitism, and scholars have noted that passions should not be discouraged, and are an integral part of dialogue (Mouffe, 1999; Ryfe, 2006; Escobar, 2009).

Though elitism has been criticized by Mouffe and others, there is justification for why elitism arose in democracy. Weber (1978, as cited in Held (2006), 130) pointed out that a system built on more a direct democracy approach would lead to mob-rule and encounter problems with ineffective administration, unwanted inefficiency, political instability and ultimately, a radical increase in the probability of oppressive minority rule. Fishkin (2008) noted democracy also about avoiding tyranny of the majority, in which people form factions and subsequently do very bad things. Chambers (2002) noted that deliberative democracy was not to be an alternative to representative democracy with numerous scholars advocating a position beyond majoritarianism. Even Mouffe (1999, 43) concedes that without some restrictions, there is no way any deliberation could take place. Therefore, there is a need to depart from emphasizing merely rational forms of speech, but also establish some ground rules that do not limit other valid forms of expression while helping discussion to determine the better argument. Calhoun (1992) points out that an important element of the public sphere concept is providing room for expression. The problem then, is how to address the issue of deliberation and provide enough room for dissenting opinions without restricting the acceptable forms of expression.

In his description of the ideal speech situation Habermas (1989) did emphasize that the force of better argument as being the primary method of assessing the validity of different arguments. Already, we have noted that the way of determining the better argument through rational consensus is a flawed method. However, since both Habermas and Mouffe agree there must be rules to restrict the forms of valid expression, it might be better to emphasize debates being well-grounded and inclusive rather than just rational. Coleman (2001), writing about the need for a practical link between representatives and citizens, added that mature

public deliberation was not just representative, but also thoughtful. Gastil and Blacks (2008) recent study defined deliberation as, “carefully examin[ing] a problem and arriv[ing] at a well-reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view.” Additionally, Gastil and Black produced a table of features to every deliberative conversation, which will be incorporated into the study as the criteria for assessing responses on Facebook. Some of features included: discussing personal and emotional experiences, as well as facts, recogniz[ing] limitations of a solution and advantages of others, and listening carefully to others, especially when you disagree.

Clearly, there needs to be a balance between allowing passions into the political discourse, but not fanning them to the point of arousing extremism and unreasoned discourse. Dahlberg (2008) in a study of the Minnesota e-democracy noted a few key features that enabled the e-mail initiative to become a deliberative forum, such as exchange and critique of reasoned moral-practical validity claims, in which people engaged and provided reasons than simply assertions, and each participant making a sincere effort to provide all information relevant to the particular problem under consideration.

### **Online Public Sphere and Social Media**

Politicians have continually attempted to connect with the public in new ways, and each technological evolution has brought optimism, but has subsequently encountered problems. For example, the introduction of television was believed to have a major impact on politics and real life. Meyrowitz (1985) noted the creation of para-social interaction in which people knew the celebrities they saw on television despite never meeting them in real-life, although he critiqued this relationship as well, saying that it emphasized talent on television rather than on personality. Since then, the role of television in politics has become more scrutinized, with Putnam critiquing television for presenting a form of passive and sterile politics that epitomizes the market experience (as cited in Kuttner, 1999). Others have been quick to point out the deficiencies of television in terms of interactivity as well, with Coleman (2001, 113) noting that neither radio nor television were ever well suited to two-way communication and Kent and Taylor (2002) stating that radio and television did not possess the capability of real-time interaction and were not interactive in the same sense the web could be.

This explains the optimism that many scholars have had with regards to the politics on the Internet. Rasmussen (2006) points out that new media deviate from this traditional mass media model, emphasizing user input and decentralizing power. Other scholars shared the same optimism about new media in politics. Hampton (2003) revealed in his case study of a community based primarily on online communication that weak links could actually still

facilitate community and collective action. The success of a Minnesota e-democracy initiative is another indication the online public sphere can be developed.

However, Howard Dean's blog (Stromer-Galley and Baker, 2006) is an example in which a blog posed as a discussion forum but featured little interaction between politician and constituent. Inconsistent results such as these have led to cynicism with regards to the power of the Internet. Rasmussen and Dahlberg have pointed out that the belief that the public sphere can be realized merely through the spread of technology is a myth. In fact, the spread of technology has been said to cause fragmentation online rather than a convergence of ideas. Gitlin (1998) notes that the development of the online world is better described as a group of public spheres rather than one unitary public sphere. With regards to this fragmentation, Sunstein (2002) states that technology has instead enabled people to tailor their online experience rather than fully informing themselves of all other choices, causing polarization. Scholars have emphasized the issues of fragmentation within the online public sphere, but Maltz (1996) said this was not necessarily something to fear, as while there will never be a global village, there already exist global villages which can overlap.

As for the deliberativeness of online political forums, studies have had mixed results. In a study of online political forums, Wilhelm (1998) noted public opinion was not cultivated in these forums nor were they a place for contestation of ideas. Other studies, such as the one done by Cammaerts and Audenhove (2005), challenged the online public sphere as a place for critical discussion, and revealed that online forums have not become places for critical debate, but instead have become environments where personal and irrational attacks are quiet frequent. While these studies reveal that citizens by themselves will not necessarily discuss issues in a reasoned manner, there have been a few studies such as the Minnesota e-democracy that have discussed initiatives that try to connect politicians and citizens together. In a successful e-democracy, the traditional issues of flaming attacks should be negated as the stakes are much higher, and the traditional powerlessness that Barber discussed earlier should no longer be applicable, with the feedback from the constituents having a direct influence on policy deliberation.

Facebook, launched in 2004, is one social media site that is viewed as the latest innovation to political communication in the U.S (Congressional Facebook Hackathon, 2012; Sweetser and Lariscy, 2008, Williams and Gulati, 2007). Chadwick noted Facebook differs from the web in that it offers an area where individuals can express different parts of themselves and build their lives online. Politics goes to where the people are, not where they would like to be. The success of Barack Obama's campaign in utilizing social networking sites to mobilize a massive

amount of people has been used as an indicator of evolution in the way political communication and campaigns are conducted (Talbot, 2008). Pew Research (2010) has reported that candidates, parties, and political organizations do not simply use the Internet to transmit information, but also use it to communicate and recruit people to take political action, on and offline. While campaigning is certainly an important part of the political process, the other important element of political communication is the dialogical discussion between citizens and politicians. While much of the research has been focused on Facebook and its increasing integral role in campaigning, research has begun to investigate its role online political discussion.

For example, Kushin and Kitchener (2011) did a study on the Facebook group discussions pertaining to torture, and noted that Facebook could be a legitimate location for discussion of political issues, with civil argument and information exchange being more prevalent than flaming attacks. However, they noted that discussion was heavily skewed in favour of the groups given stance on torture, as opposed to equally representing sides for and against torture. Additionally, they noted that the study could not be generalized to other Facebook groups. Another limitation was that it did not look at groups which featured both citizens and politicians. In another study by Mascaro, et al. (2012) investigated large group political interactions in the Facebook group Coffee Party which was established in protest to the rise of the Tea party. While both studies as well as the studies on Facebook campaigning have added much to the understanding of political interactions on Facebook, both have either been restricted to political deliberation among just constituents, or looking at interactions between constituents and politicians in the context of campaigning.

Therefore, the recent SOPA deliberation has been argued to be an evolution in the way politics is conducted and the way citizens interact with their constituents. However, is this truly the case, or are the recent discussions regarding SOPA just another form of campaigning and mobilizing by politicians? And does it improve on this issue of interactivity? Or is there still disconnect between politicians and citizens that Davis discussed?

### **Summary**

Research has discussed the impact of the internet in two different areas. The first area champions the Internet as a place for alternative power (Castells, 2007; Coleman, 2001). The second area however, has been noticeably more critical of the rise in the internet and its ability to enhance democracy (Cammaerts and Audenhove, 2005; Sunstein, 2001; Habermas, 2006). The Internet has created a new tool for power, but it has also enabled the same mob rule issues and incivility that troubled democratic theorists to rise again in a new digital form.

Facilitation and proper rules/guidelines are the ways undesirable interactions can be eliminated, but to what degree can facilitation or rules enhance discussion? There is also a need to differentiate between substantive interactions and shallow interactions that are merely a façade of interaction between politicians and citizens. In summary, the research questions are as follows:

- **How do politicians engage constituents with the issues of SOPA on their Facebook pages?**
- **Did they present their arguments or pose questions to their constituents?**
- **Did constituents provide reasoning to their responses to SOPA on politicians' Facebook pages and provide suggestions for more effective legislation that better addresses all the issues?**
- **Did constituents exchange ideas with each other on Facebook?**
- **Did politicians join the exchange in a meaningful way on their Facebook pages?**
- **Was there any consensus reached on Facebook regarding SOPA?**

## **METHODOLOGY**

Three different methods were considered for this study: Interview, survey, and content analysis. After careful consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of the three methods, it was ultimately determined that content analysis would be the most effective way of answering the research questions outlined above.

### **Rationale for the Method used and Study**

Previous studies in the area of political use of the Internet have varied in their methodology. Some have conducted surveys of online users (Smith, A., Schlozman, K.L, Verba, S, Brady, H., 2009; Feezell, J.T., Conroy, M., Guerrero, M., 2009; Schlosberg, D., Zavetovski, S., Schulman, S., 2011), others have conducted interviews of politicians and users (Mason, 2008), while there are numerous other studies that have also done a content analysis of various online forums (Sweetser and Lariscy, 2008; Mascaro, Goggins, and Novak, 2012; Kushin and Kitchener, 2012; Hale, Musso, and Weare, 1998). Ultimately, content analysis was determined to be the appropriate method, as it was the least likely to be impacted by personal reporting biases like surveys (Zimmer, 2010). Wilhelm (1998) citing Weber, summed up the strengths of content analysis, stating that content analysis, “yields unobtrusive measures in which neither sender nor the receiver of the message is aware that

it is being analysed.” Taking also into consideration Macintosh’s (2004) recommendation that research be holistic and take into account all the stakeholders rather than just one party in isolation, a content analysis was done of a major social networking site where barriers to entry were comparatively low.

With the massive popularity of Facebook and the numerous politicians now joining Facebook to reach out to their constituents, it is an ideal environment to study whether or not a new public sphere is forming that effectively connects citizens to politicians in a way that allows for discussion and conversation to occur. While previous studies have looked at discussion in Facebook groups (Mascaro and Goggins, 2012; Kushin and Kitchener, 2011), and the interactions between constituents and politicians during elections (Sweetser and Lariscy, 2008), this study will look at comments on U.S politicians’ pages regarding proposed legislation being deliberated in government.

The Facebook pages of politicians offer a new way to look at the political public sphere. While studies have traditionally been limited due to the lack of participation by active politicians and issues of anonymity, Facebook addresses both of these issues. Because it was initially a social site, many people signed up and provided their real identities in the hopes of connecting with others, whether it being old friends they had not contacted in years, or finding new friends with similar interests. While Facebook was initially restricted to young people, the fact that it is now open to anyone with a valid email address has lowered barriers to entry even more, and when U.S politicians took note of the exploding popularity of social networking sites, they joined the network themselves (Sweetser and Lariscy, 2008).

Now politicians post a variety of different status updates regarding policy and other development in the Capitol, and citizens have begun to post comments to their status updates, creating a virtual environment where citizens and politicians can come together. With the difficulties the United States government and other countries have encountered with creating effective channels and links with its citizens to communicate, it is an important development for the study of policy deliberations.

As for the guidelines, this study found these politician pages are open, only stating explicitly that they will delete comments that contain profanity, personal attacks, or are completely off-topic. This only guideline set a standard which could potentially keep the conversation focused on policy. However, other than this, there are no rules or guidelines that facilitate the interactions between the politicians and their constituents on Facebook about SOPA.

## **Sampling**

The question then is how to narrow down the data. With the sheer size and scope of issues that politicians post regularly on their Facebook pages, it is necessary to narrow down the issues to be investigated and reported on. SOPA was an ideal case study because, in addition to engaging many Americans in the debate, the legislation was also effectively bi-partisan, gaining support from both Republicans and Democrats in an attempt to address the issues of piracy and copyright infringement.

Taking a note from Mascaro, Goggins and Novaks study on the Coffee Party (2012) and Hansens (1998) work on content analysis, the study sliced the data and analysis by topic and time in order to see how participants engaged through social media over time. To study and trace the development of the SOPA deliberation, a timeframe was established, from the time the bill was first proposed (October 27, 2011) to when the vote on the proposed legislation was delayed and the legislation ultimately falling out of favour with many of the politicians in Congress (January 20, 2012). Three politicians were therefore selected (John Conyers, Judy Chu, and Zoe Lofgren) who represented both sides of the issue, and threads and responses were calculated and recorded.

U.S representative Zoe Lofgren was the obvious selection for the anti-SOPA side. She was the loudest critic of the legislation, and posted 29 threads about the bill on her page as it was being deliberated in Congress. These 29 threads received 316 responses from constituents. The selection of pro-SOPA representatives proved to be more difficult, as many of the pro-SOPA politicians that were initially analysed chose to either not post about the controversial legislation, or did not elicit many comments from users regarding the legislation.

Ultimately, Judy Chu and John Conyers were selected as the U.S representatives who supported SOPA legislation to be studied. While Conyers did not post any updates regarding SOPA, that did not stop the people from posting frequently and repeatedly about the legislation on his Facebook page, making it an interesting sample to study in comparison to Lofgren's page, which featured 29 threads regarding the legislation. Judy Chu posted only once about the SOPA legislation. However, this posting elicited 62 responses. With these three representatives, there were three different ways politicians went about dealing with the SOPA controversy on Facebook. One politician chose to simply ignore the solicitations for comment regarding SOPA, another continuously posted updates about SOPA and urged people to protest this "insane" bill, while the last representative did not attempt to sell her opinion to the public, but rather attempted to engage citizens and hear their suggestions and thoughts regarding the SOPA legislation.



## **Coding Frame**

The results and difficulties of the pilot study along with the literature produced the coding frame used in the study. Results from the pilot study indicated that while Inter-coder reliability was quite high (Wang, 2012), difficulties in coding some of the initial variables indicated that there was a possibility that part of the coding was the same simply due to chance (Lombard et. al., 2002). Therefore, the coding frame was modified slightly to eliminate this. The initial pilot study also included irrelevant data that would have impacted the results and analysis, and this data was subsequently eliminated. Furthermore, in accordance with the recommendations by Lombard and others, inter-coder reliability was calculated only using the variables that were more likely to be coded differently. In this case, Variables 4 and 5 for threads, and Variables 13, 14, and 16 were for the responses were all key variables used to calculate ICR. Much like the first study, a second coder was trained and coded the data independently of the researcher to assess the reliability of the data. Coders randomly coded 10% of each dataset for Inter-coder Reliability.

The coding frame created will initially assess deliberation and conversation on the selected threads. In a departure from similar studies, the objective of the coding frame was not to discriminate irrational, or uncivil speech from rational speech, but to look at the reasoning of the responses provided and what issues they brought up the most about the SOPA legislation. If the emphasis of good deliberation is on the expression of a diversity of viewpoints, (Mouffe, 1999; Guttman, 2008) and reasoned assertions (Dahlberg, 2008; Habermas, 2006), then it is acceptable to depart from simply coding responses as either irrational or rational. There is also a need for all parties to have clear awareness of all the issues involved (Yankelovich, 1991), therefore the coding frame also considered the issues of freedom of speech, innovation, and copyright protection. Yankelovich emphasized that people be aware of all the consequences of legislation, and if all parties were aware of all the consequences and accepted them, then they could better come to public judgment.

A couple variables were critical to the study. The threads emphasized two of variables. Variable 4, Nature of thread, analysed the threads to see if they posted about SOPA, and if there was a posting pertaining to SOPA, what was the nature of the thread? Was it to praise constituents on their vocal support or protests of the bill? Was it a simple call to action without any arguments being made? Was it a mere status update on recent developments regarding the bill? Or did it post a question or viewpoint for the citizens to consider? Did the post try to elicit responses through more innovative means such as through a poll or other Facebook tool? The objective of the variable was to look at how politicians initially facilitated

discussion. Guttman noted that facilitators had a major influence on proceedings, therefore the variable tracked if the nature of thread resulted in any predictable pattern of responses.

The other key variable for threads was outside referencing. The SOPA debate revolved around 3 key issues: freedom of expression and internet use, innovation and small business, and copyright protection. Scholars emphasized within the deliberation that there be a diversity of viewpoints expressed (Mouffe, 1999; Habermas, 1989; Dahlgren, 2008; Gastil & Black, 2008), and this variable was designed to see if there was indeed a diversity of different viewpoints expressed, or there was clearly one viewpoint that was expressed more frequently than others.

As for the responses, in many ways, the coding frame is quite similar to that used by Sweetser and Lariscy (2008), which coded the quality of the comment as either “shallow,” or “complex.” For the type of response, the variable did not penalize responses for being emotional, but rather measured how much reasoning was in their response, very much in the spirit of the Minnesota e-democracy. For example, in Variable 13, a simple “STOP SOPA” response would not be classified as a reasoned response, but a mobilization response (Call to Action). The Call to action response also needed to be a call to do a political action, such as sign an e-petition or call a politician to vote against a bill, a call to action response did not count calls to read more information about the legislation, as it should be expected for people would do some research before doing any action. Similarly, a “Go Zoe” response would be classified as a mere praise or personal response, as the response would do nothing to move the discussion forward. Other responses that implored a politician to critique other politicians would also be counted as personal. Uncivil or attack responses, which followed the verbal attack with no reasoning whatsoever, were coded as non-reasoned. Reasoned response included any response that were focused on the legislation and had some reasoning to back up their assertions, like Dahlberg (2008) suggested.

Clarification/Correction responses covered any responses that were in the form of an inquiry or question regarding the legislation, or if the respondent followed up a previous post with a clarification or a correction. Finally, Suggestion/recommendation tabulated all the responses that provided suggestions to improve the SOPA bill, or suggested ways Internet legislation proposed in the future could better address the issues of freedom, innovation, and copyright.

Another key variable (Variable 14) was nature of response, which analysed the responses more generally in terms of its focus. Focus on Politicians counted any response that was focused primarily on a politician and did not reference the legislation at all. Any response

that critiqued politicians for their position on SOPA or their past voting record was coded as focusing on the politician. Focus on legislation but offers few suggestions counted any response that focused on the legislation but provided no suggestions on how to improve the legislation so that it better resolved the issues of piracy and freedom of speech. Focus on legislation but offers suggestions counted any response that provided reasons for their assertions and made suggestions for how to better improve the legislation. Variable 16 then looked at issues referenced to see what issues people cited in their responses. No referencing was for any response that did not reference any issue such as freedom of speech, innovation, or copyright protection. The “Cites only freedom of speech” variable counted any response that only referenced the issue of the freedom of speech and/or the constitution. “Cites only innovation” counted any response focused on small business and not stifling innovation and jobs. “Cites only copyright protection” was any response that only discussed copyright protection. Finally, multiple perspectives cited all the different issues such as freedom of speech, innovation, and copyright protection in their response.

Other key variables to the study were the Exchange variable and the SPAM variable, both of which measured to what extent people were looking for discussion and if they were listening to comments from others respondents. A response was only counted as an exchange if it explicitly referenced either a previous respondent by name (using the tag @ to reference the person) or by referencing the same issue as a previous post. A response was only counted as SPAM if it was exactly the same as another post without any sort of variation. Finally, Likes were counted to see if consistently granted authority to any type of response.

In summary, the coding frame would first assess how the threads initially opened up the debate, whether it was through an argument or question, and how many comments and likes the thread initially received. The response variables in the coding frame would then look at what type of response were most frequent, whether they were reasoned or unreasoned, and whether they were mostly praise or suggestions for improving the legislation. The variables would then dig deeper into the nature of the response by not counting whether or not people were for or against the bill, but from what perspective they critiqued the bill. Did they address all the different problems and issues with regards the Internet legislation was trying to address? Or did respondents simply reference one problem with the bill at the expense of considering the other problems the bill was trying to address?

### **Cluster Analysis**

In addition to a frequency analysis, a cluster analysis was done on the data. Cluster analysis is a method typically used to organize large sets of data into groups or clusters (Burns & Burns, 2008). The objective of using cluster analysis in this study was to go beyond the frequency counts that were utilized in other studies related to Facebook (Kushin and Kitchener, 2011; Mascaro, Goggins, and Novak, 2012; Sweetser and Lariscy, 2008), and determine if clear groups formed with responses sharing very similar characteristics to each other. Cluster analysis would also be useful in connecting two separate variables together, such as likes to a response and the type of response. Since the data did differ, some methods of analysis needed to be slightly modified. For example, while the threads from Zoe Lofgren and Judy Chu all pertained to the SOPA debate, Conyers page had no posts regarding SOPA within the time period. However, with the significant number of responses to Conyers page regarding SOPA, a separate cluster analysis was done on the set of data before it was compared to the responses of Zoe Lofgren and Judy Chu.

### **RESULTS**

Inter-coder reliability was first assessed to determine the validity of the findings. Counting only the critical variables to the study towards ICR, the total ICR score was at 100% (Threads), 91.3%, (John Conyers), 91.6% (Judy Chu), and 92.5% (Zoe Lofgren), an acceptable level for the findings to be further analysed.

Since Zoe Lofgren's and Judy Chu's pages included threads pertaining specifically to SOPA, a frequency tables and a cluster analysis were conducted on the threads themselves. It is interesting to note that many of the twenty-nine Lofgren threads (Figure 1) made an argument on why the legislation should be defeated, and while she did offer an alternative bill, the OPEN Act, there were no instances where Lofgren inquired about what citizens thought of the bill and how the Internet legislation should be improved in the future.

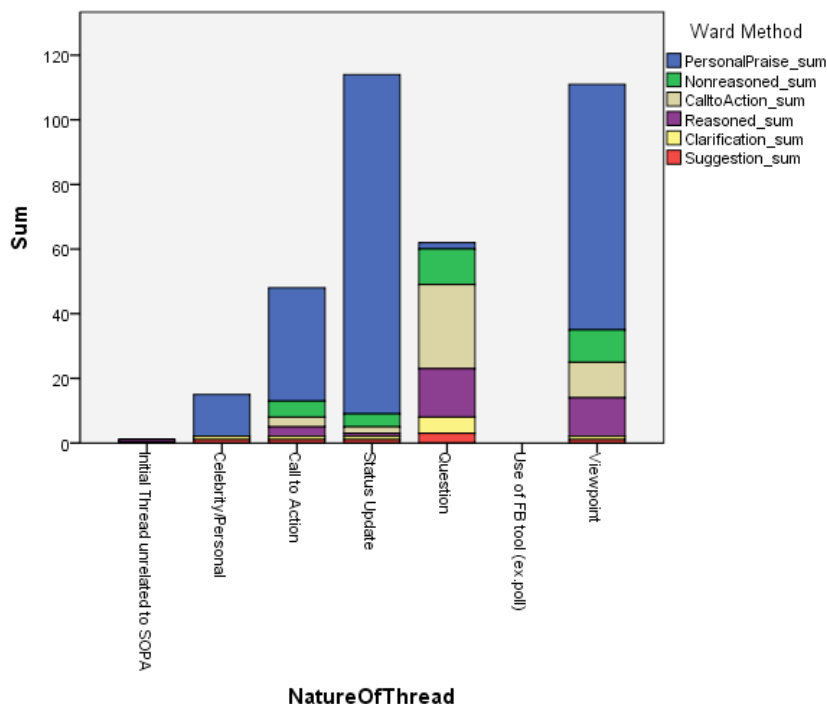
**Figure 1: Nature Of Thread**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Initial Thread unrelated to SOPA	1	3.3	3.3	3.3
Celebrity/Personal	1	3.3	3.3	6.7
Call to Action	4	13.3	13.3	20.0
Status Update	7	23.3	23.3	43.3
Question	1	3.3	3.3	46.7
Use of FB tool	0	0.0	0.0	46.7
Viewpoint	16	53.3	53.3	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Lofgren was very diverse in the type of threads she posted, but none of her threads could be classified as deliberative. Chu on the other hand posted just one thread, and despite the huge discrepancy in the number of threads, her one thread yielded interesting contrasts to Lofgren’s. It is worth noting all the posts were mostly standard, with none of them utilizing Facebook polls or other tools to facilitate discussion.

Figure 2 noted the type of responses that were most frequent in each type of thread. Viewpoints in this case tended to lead to more praise responses that were not deliberative, while threads that posed a question to constituents led to a more diverse range of responses and a higher frequency of suggestions.

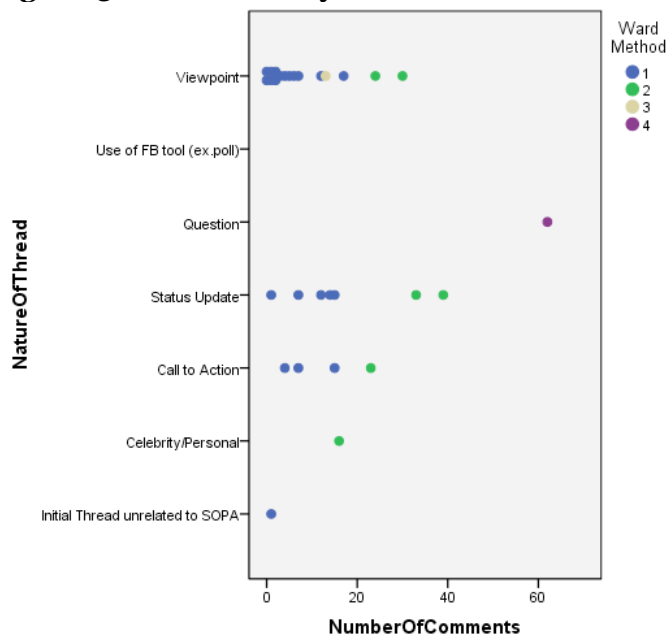
**Figure 2: Cluster Analysis – Threads**



Of the threads, the most popular thread that received the most likes (Appendix 1- ZLT20, number of likes: 188) was a status update in form of an image glorifying her role in protecting the Internet rather than deliberating on the bill. The subsequent responses to the thread were also very much geared towards praising the image, with comments such as “Oh God that’s awesome” being quite frequent (Appendix 1- ZL177). A cluster analysis of the initial threads revealed they all received roughly the same number of comments, with Group 1 Threads, which were composed of mostly viewpoints, receiving fewer comments than Group 2 responses (Figure 3), which were composed mostly of status updates and threads of a more personal/celebrity nature, which commended her on her position, but were not very deliberative on the bill.

In fact, her threads seemed to move the focus of the responses away from the legislation and more toward focusing on her record as a politician, complimenting her for her hard work, and encouraging her to continue to fight the legislation. In contrast, Group 4, which featured Judy Chu’s one thread, received a significantly higher number of comments than the other groups, indicating a higher level of engagement.

**Figure 3: Cluster Analysis – Threads**



The study then looked at the responses on each page, starting with John Conyers’ page. With little facilitation from Conyers regarding Internet legislation, results (Figure 4) revealed that of the responses (n =292), a great majority of them were simple call to action responses (46.8%). As Figure 4 indicates, call to action responses were the most frequent. However, it is

interesting to note that reasoned responses were the second highest (23.9%). This would seem to indicate that people were well-informed of all the issues involved. However, further study of the data indicated this was not the case. There were no suggestions or recommendations made by any of the constituents with regards to the bill, despite the fact that they brought up valid issues.

**Figure 4: Type Of Response- John Conyers' Responses**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Celebrity/Personal	3	1.0	1.0	1.0
	Non-reasoned response	61	20.5	20.9	21.9
	Call to Action	139	46.8	47.6	69.5
	Reasoned response	71	23.9	24.3	93.8
	Clarification/correction	18	6.1	6.2	100.0
	Total	292	98.3	100.0	
Missing	System	5	1.7		
Total		297	100.0		

Going deeper into the data, Cluster analysis (Figures 5-7) utilizing Wards method yielded 3 groups, whose characteristics could be summarized as follows:

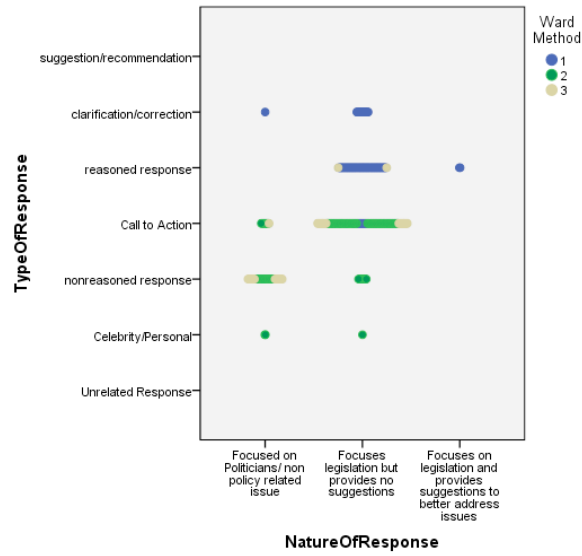
**Group 1:** Responses tended to be either reasoned or inquisitive regarding the legislation. However, the responses were skewed towards innovation and free speech and rarely discussed copyright protection and piracy issues. While focused on the legislation, these responses also provided few suggestions on how to improve the bill. The group averaged the highest number of likes.

**Group 2:** Responses tended to be non-reasoned or personal attacks and were focused on criticizing the politician for their support of the bill rather than on deliberating the merits of the legislation. In terms of outside referencing, the responses were also heavily skewed towards non-reasoned responses.

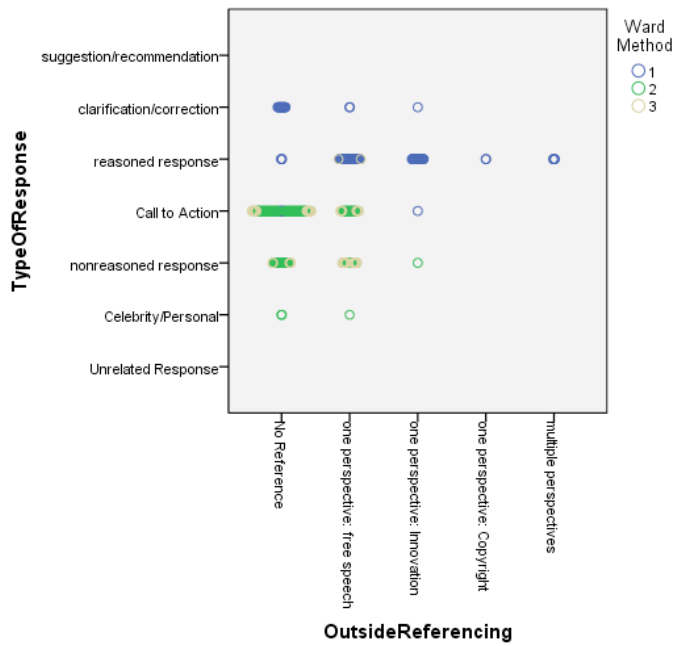
**Group 3:** Responses were only call to action responses that urged the politician to stop supporting the bill. They provided no suggestions on improving the legislation, and did not frequently reference any particular issue with the bill. When Group 3 responses did reference an issue, it was always about free speech.

As scatterplot charts show, Group 1 featured many responses that did not make any suggestion regarding the legislation and were also primarily focused on freedom of speech issues. With regards to likes to comments, while Group 1 had the highest number of likes, the subsequent lack of exchange rendered these likes inconsequential.

**Figure 5: Cluster Analysis- John Conyers' Responses**

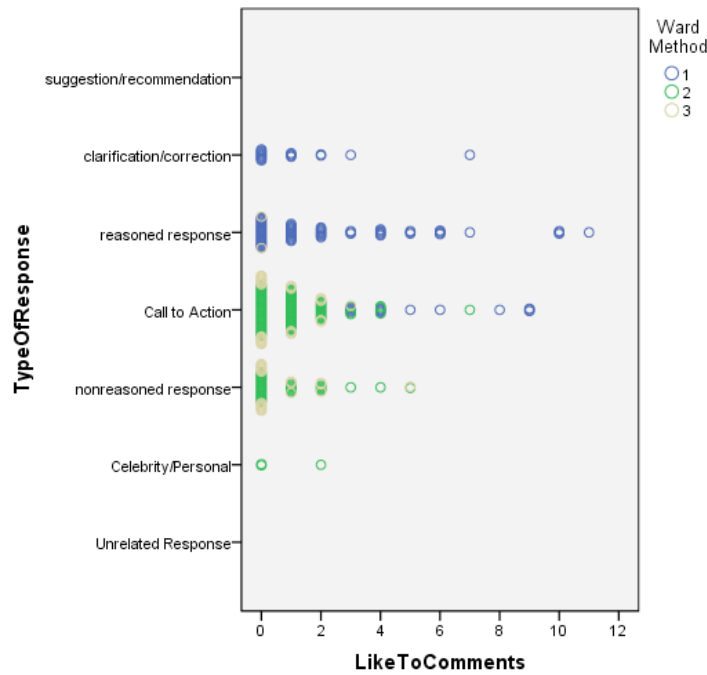


**Figure 6: Cluster Analysis - John Conyers' Responses**





**Figure 7: Cluster Analysis- John Conyers' Responses**



Many of the responses were made in isolation of one another, with very few exchanges (2.4%) taking place among the many responses, and there was a significant amount of SPAM (17.5%) in comparison to the other datasets (Figures 8-9).

**Figure 8: SPAM- John Conyers' Responses**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NO	240	80.8	82.2	82.2
	YES	52	17.5	17.8	100.0
	Total	292	98.3	100.0	
Missing	System	5	1.7		
Total		297	100.0		

**Figure 9: Exchange- John Conyers' Responses**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Not an exchange	285	96.0	97.6	97.6
	an exchange with other responses	7	2.4	2.4	100.0
	Total	292	98.3	100.0	
Missing	System	5	1.7		
Total		297	100.0		

Many respondents simply posted the same message on his board multiple times, indicating they were more interested in calling him to act rather than deliberating on the merits of the bill with others on the page. In summary, with little facilitation, Conyers' page became a mere mobilizing site, with many people calling for the bill to be defeated without offering any alternative or recommendation on how to proceed forward, and focusing primarily on the protecting the free internet.

Zoe Lofgren's page yielded significantly different results. Unlike Conyers, who avoided posting any threads on the controversial Internet legislation, Lofgren let it be known quite early on that she was against this "insane" bill and posted various viewpoints that supported her position. It should be noted that Lofgren was arguing a very popular position, with many people and companies also protesting the bill ([sopastrike.com](http://sopastrike.com)).

Lofgren had a few more responses than Conyers (n=316) and results from the frequency table (Figure 10) reveal that Personal/Celebrity responses, in which respondents only complimented or praised the politician for their stance on the issue, were the most frequent by a very large margin (72.5%), and a majority of responses with regards to outside referencing either did not reference any issue (85.8%) or focused on the issue of freedom of speech issue (9.2%, Figure 11).

**Figure 10: Type Of Response - Zoe Lofgren’s Responses**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Unrelated Response	11	3.5	3.5	3.5
Celebrity/Personal	229	72.5	72.5	75.9
nonreasoned response	19	6.0	6.0	82.0
Call to Action	18	5.7	5.7	87.7
reasoned response	17	5.4	5.4	93.0
clarification/correction	17	5.4	5.4	98.4
suggestion/recommendation	5	1.6	1.6	100.0
Total	316	100.0	100.0	

**Figure 11: Outside Referencing – Zoe Lofgren’s Responses**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid No Referencing	271	85.8	85.8	85.8
Focuses on free speech/constitution	29	9.2	9.2	94.9
Focuses on innovation, small business	4	1.3	1.3	96.2
Focuses on protecting copyright defeating piracy	4	1.3	1.3	97.5
multiple perspectives	8	2.5	2.5	100.0
Total	316	100.0	100.0	

Cluster Analysis further revealed that the responses could be divided into four groups (Figures 12-14):

**Group 1:** Responses primarily complimented and praise Zoe Lofgren for her position, and turned focus away from legislation and onto her record as a Politician. Responses however, received a significant number of likes.

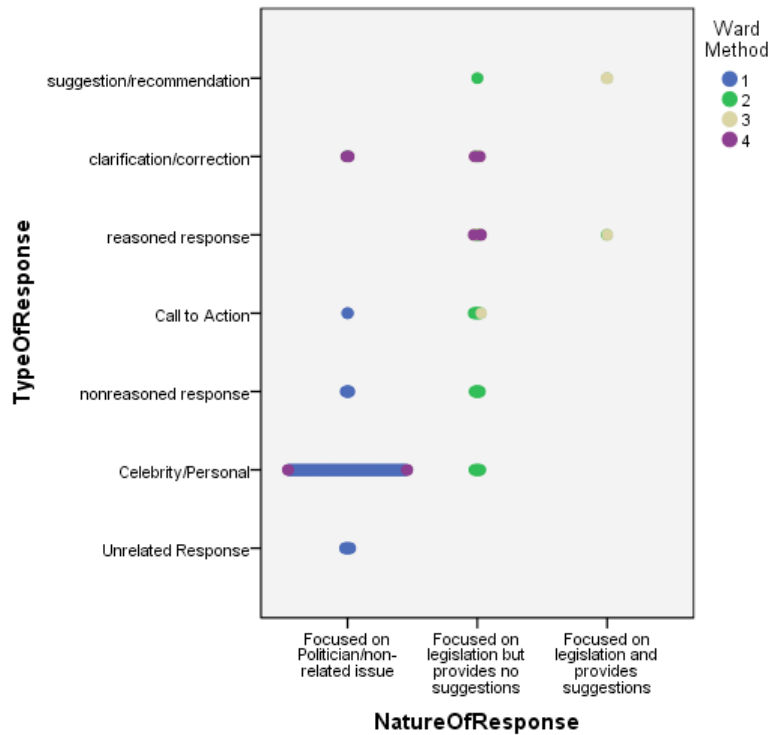
**Group 2:** Responses were much more diverse in terms of type, but did not make any suggestions or recommendations regarding the legislation.

**Group 3:** Responses were primarily suggestions and recommendations, but did not receive as many likes as Group 1.

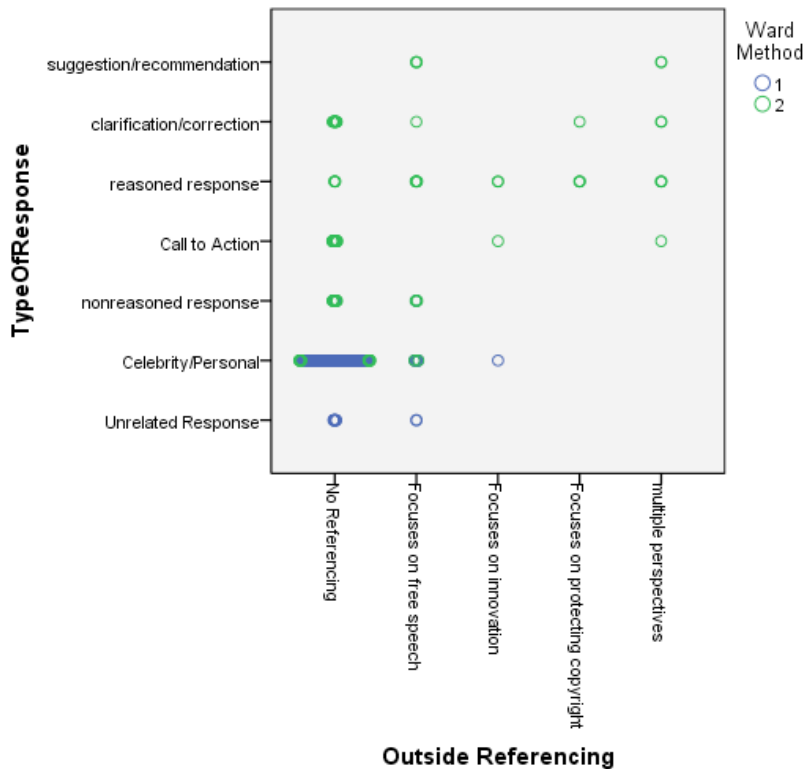
**Group 4:** Responses were clarifications and reasoned responses, but once again received very few likes.

Additionally, there was once again very little exchange of ideas between people with regards to the legislation (95.6%, Figure 15).

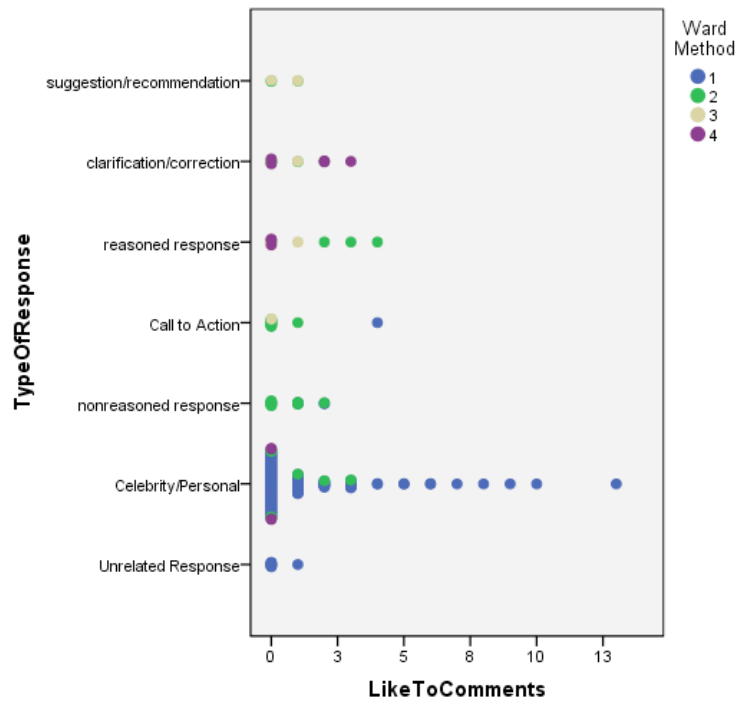
**Figure 12: Cluster Analysis – Zoe Lofgren’s Responses**



**Figure 13: Cluster Analysis– Zoe Lofgren’s Responses**



**Figure 14: Cluster Analysis- Zoe Lofgren’s Responses**



**Figure 15: Exchange – Zoe Lofgren’s Responses**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Not an exchange	302	95.6	95.6	95.6
an exchange with other responses	14	4.4	4.4	100.0
Total	316	100.0	100.0	

Judy Chu was the last politician analysed for the study. Despite the fact that Judy Chu posted just once about the bill in the timeframe, her thread was significantly different than the other two representatives. Unlike Conyers, who posted nothing on SOPA and seemed to avoid the subject entirely, and unlike Lofgren, who advocated a popular position, Chu represented the pro-SOPA side and in her one thread of the dataset, inquired about the concerns and issues people had regarding the bill. Judy Chu’s initial thread was the only that actually invited people to voice their concerns and give their own suggestions as to how to improve Internet legislation. She made no argument, and instead implored people to give their input. Interestingly, the range of responses were much more diverse when compared Conyers and Lofgren. In a stark contrast to the other two representatives though, Chu received a variety of different responses. However, as the frequency table shows (Figure 16), Call to Action responses were still the most frequent on her Facebook page (40.3%), and the responses

while focused on the legislation (Figure 17), did not make any substantive suggestions to better address the issues (41.9%).

**Figure 16: Type Of Response - Judy Chu's Responses**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Celebrity/Personal	2	3.2	3.2	3.2
nonreasoned response	12	19.4	19.4	22.6
Call to Action	25	40.3	40.3	62.9
reasoned response	15	24.2	24.2	87.1
clarification/correction	5	8.1	8.1	95.2
suggestion/recommendation	3	4.8	4.8	100.0
Total	62	100.0	100.0	

Additionally, in terms of the nature of responses, the percentage of responses that actually provided suggestions though for improving the bill were still much higher in comparison to the other pages, with 32.3% of responses making suggestions toward improving the bill, just short of the number of responses that did not provide suggestions (41.9%, Figure 17).

**Figure 17: Nature Of Response Judy Chu's Responses**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Focused on Politicians	16	25.8	25.8	25.8
Focuses on legislation but provides no suggestions	26	41.9	41.9	67.7
Focuses on legislation and provides suggestions	20	32.3	32.3	100.0
Total	62	100.0	100.0	

In terms of outside referencing (Figure 18), responses to Judy Chu's page, despite a large frequency of responses still not referencing any issue (38.7%) or only referencing the freedom of speech issue (30.6%), she did have a much higher percentage of responses that cited multiple sides of the issue than the other pages (21%). However, just like Conyers' page, Chu did not reply to any messages regarding SOPA, and there was little exchange among the constituents who responded to her initial thread (Figure 19). Once again, Chu did not express her own views on the thread.

**Figure 18: Outside Referencing – Judy Chu’s Responses**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid No Referencing	24	38.7	38.7	38.7
References only	19	30.6	30.6	69.4
Freedom of Speech				
Referencing Innovation	5	8.1	8.1	77.4
Copyright protection	1	1.6	1.6	79.0
Multiple perspectives	13	21.0	21.0	100.0
Total	62	100.0	100.0	

**Figure 19: Exchange – Judy Chu’s Responses**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Not an exchange	61	98.4	98.4	98.4
an exchange with other responses	1	1.6	1.6	100.0
Total	62	100.0	100.0	

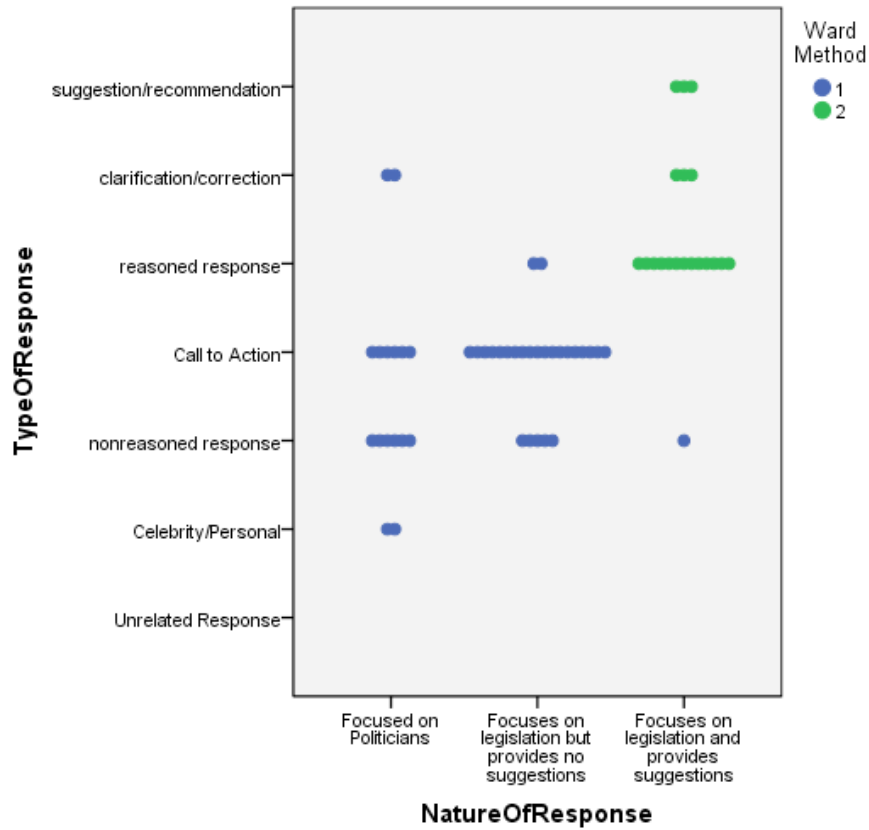
Cluster Analysis of Judy Chu’s broke the data further into two groups (Figure 20-22):

**Group 1:** Responses tended to be non-reasoned or call to action responses that focused on the issue of freedom of speech or no issue at all. Responses also made few suggestions as to how to improve the legislation.

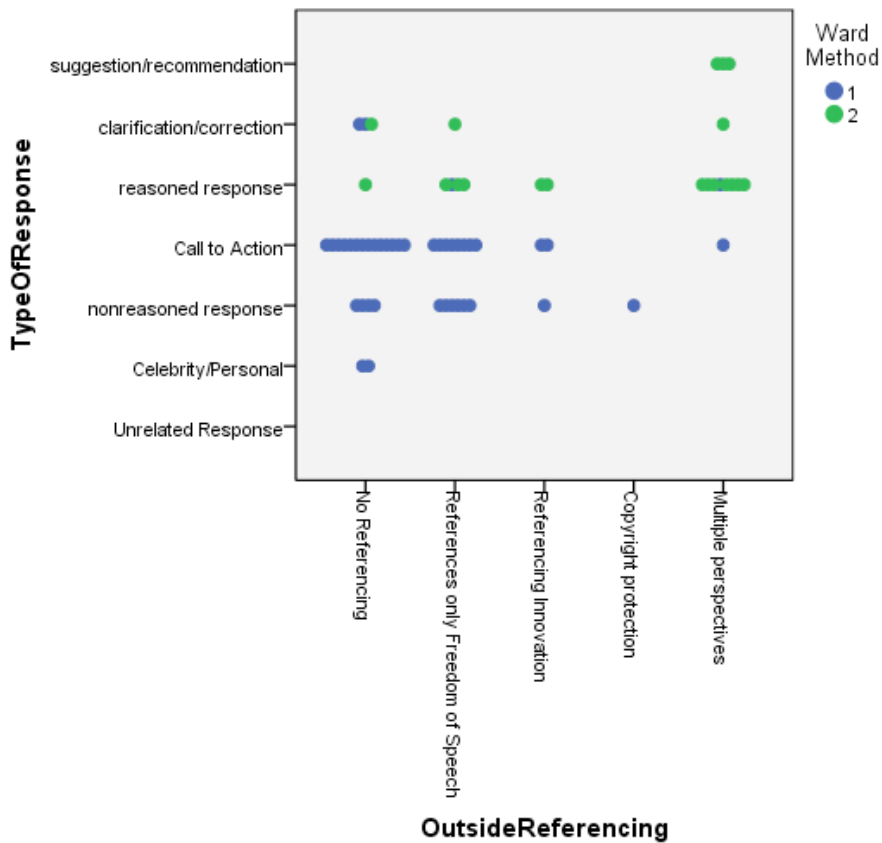
**Group 2:** Responses tended to be more reasoned and cited multiple issues to consider in their responses. The group also made more suggestions to improve the legislation.

In summary, the responses of Chu’s page indicated a much higher level of deliberation and thoughtfulness than the other representatives pages, but with no facilitation or follow up to by the politician to her initial inquiry, the conversation never developed, and it became a site in which there was moderately more levels of deliberation, but very little conversation or true engagement with the issues. While there was evidence that respondents to other pages had migrated to her page and posted responses as well, these responses were mostly spam, with the respondent merely copying and pasting their previous messages rather than staying and engaging with the other users on the page (Appendix 3).

**Figure 20: Cluster Analysis - Judy Chu's Responses**

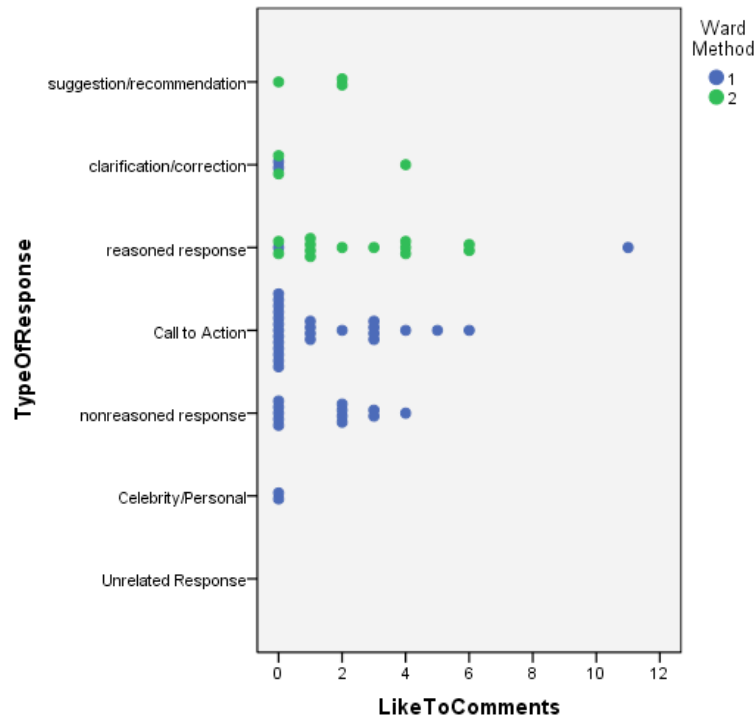


**Figure 21: Cluster Analysis - Judy Chu's Responses**





**Figure 22: Cluster Analysis - Judy Chu's Responses**



## DISCUSSION

Overall, what became readily apparent was that the Facebook pages of U.S representatives, despite having created a converged public space for constituents and politicians, did not yield many substantive exchanges or interactions like other Facebook groups. Therefore, these pages did not resemble a public sphere. There were also very few intermediaries to be found, with many of the frequent posters either posting praise or call to action responses, and not initiating conversations with the other users. Likes, for the most part, especially on Lofgren's page, went towards responses that supported the popular position, and due to lack of exchange on all pages, likes were inconsequential in terms of differentiating responses and assessing authority. Additionally, these pages did not have a balanced perspective on the issues involved. The dominant issue that many respondents cited was freedom of speech, and there was little referencing to the issues of copyright protection and innovation.

While the discussion was unbalanced and lacked exchange among constituents, facilitation was also lacking on these pages. Despite the fact that Lofgren posted many threads on the bill and occasionally responded to constituent posts unlike Conyers, she did not actually facilitate or try to encourage a conversation about the bill through her comments, with many of them falling into the personal/praise category. It is especially unfortunate in this case that no conversation developed, as there were actually very different viewpoints expressed on her

page. While one response (Appendix 1- Response ZL313) said that current legislation was adequate enough to deal with copyright infringement, another earlier respondent (Appendix 1- ZL283) said that the current legislation was not enough, and she had to spend hours each day finding infringing works online in order to protect her copyright. It would have been fascinating to see these two differing viewpoints meet and discuss the merits of each other's argument. Unfortunately, neither respondent ever made contact with the other. In summary, Lofgren's page became a fan page, with many people praising her for her position on SOPA rather than deliberating on the issues.

Consequently, what was also quite readily apparent was the fact that politicians were interacting with constituents on a very superficial level. All of the responses from politicians were attributed to Zoe Lofgren, and her contributions hardly made the conversation more deliberative. Her comments seemed instead geared more towards connecting with her constituents in a way not unlike politicians during an election year (Sweetser and Laricsy, 2008). This clear lack of substantive comments from politicians reveals two things. First, the much discussed issue of the interactivity façade (Bruns, 2008; Kent and Taylor; Coleman) is still very much an issue. Second, that it was clear politicians were interacting with constituents more like consumers rather than citizens, to sell them on an argument rather than to enable them to think critically about the issue. Looking at the threads, many of them were standard posts, which did not incorporate the other tools on Facebook such as a poll, and only one of them posed a question for respondents to consider. Rather than inquiring about a constituent's position on the legislation, or following up with constituents about their concerns, many of the politicians were very conservative in their interactions, conveying superficial messages that only connected with constituents on a personal level rather than push the debate further. The ending thread of Lofgren's page, congratulated people on protecting their rights as citizens of the United States, and warned that they should be vigilant should SOPA ever return. However, this can hardly be considered a victory on all fronts, as there are still copyright infractions that are not being addressed and that were brought up on her page. Through the superficial interaction that pandered toward citizens and the non-interaction, people were clearly being treated as commodities, or potential votes that could be utilized in the next election year.

If there was an encouraging sign from the study, it was the fact that constituents were beginning to actively ask for politicians to comment on their responses regarding the legislation. It was clear that a few constituents wanted to hear what their representatives had to say regarding the issue rather than just have an informal connection with them. However, this encouraging sign could also be sign of such forums degrading into cynicism and

spamming if these online interactions did not improve. A few responses stated they did not believe politicians were even paying attention to the pages and were reading any of the comments posted on their walls (Appendix 2). This a sign that cynicism is growing and it should also be noted that spam was most frequent on Conyers' page, in which there was no attempt to engage with the number of voices inquiring about the SOPA legislation.

It is clear that the ability constituents have to now contact politicians on a national level via new technology is still a very novel idea to many, and one that leads to many constituents just being happy they can talk with politicians in a new way. The current interaction is not unlike the mediated relationships Meyrowitz discusses in his work on television. While research was initially necessary to discover that such mediated relationships exist, it is now quite readily apparent from browsing the Facebook pages of politicians that such relationships on social networking sites are frequent. However, these interactions, like un-civility, can cripple a public sphere rather than enhance it if people are too reluctant to truly participate. Therefore, in order for these e-democracy initiatives to move forward, politicians must start interacting with people on a much more substantive level. In the past, it might have been enough to have a presence on a social networking site, but with Facebook having more of a political role and constituents trying to connect with their politicians through it, having a presence is not enough.

When Guttman discussed policy deliberation, she never stated that it was acceptable for officials to walk out of the policy forums and just allow constituents to debate amongst themselves the merits of the bill. Is it any different when politicians never reference their pages for comments nor post any threads regarding important policy debates? Yankelovich (1991) and Barber (1984) both stated providing information and encouraging everyone to speak could help deliberations overcome issues such as the spiral of silence (Guttman, 2011) or yielding to the experts. Because technology has been introduced as completely new and innovative on its own by some scholars (Castells, 2007; Rheingold, 1992), this literature has overlooked the fundamental social aspects that the public sphere concept highlights that enable these technologies to cause positive change.

The very open-ended and freedom that Facebook has given its users to modify their pages show the versatility and the adaptability of the social networking site, which have enabled it to develop from a mere social site to a potential political site. However, the very open-endedness of Facebook and social networking sites is also what has created the most serious challenges for politicians in terms of policy deliberation on social networking sites. While politicians have been able to effectively integrate social networking into their campaigns, the

challenges are much different for policy deliberation. Simple giving access to anyone and providing little facilitation clearly is not effective at generating substantive debate and discussion, and while conversations have occurred in other spaces on Facebook, it cannot just be assumed that political deliberation will occur if the representatives establish a presence on the network. In fact, sites for mobilization and fandom are just as likely if not more likely without a facilitator and proper rules or guidelines.

This study renews the call against technological determinism, and emphasizes the role of citizens in utilizing communication technologies to not just create freedom in authoritarian regimes, but also utilizing these technologies to improve democracy. Clearly, these technologies can connect people in new ways, but they will not solve the issues of deliberation and active engagement. Guttman in her summary of policy deliberation noted the effort and time real-world policy deliberations took to organize the people and the effort and time took from the people who participated in them. There had to be a process to ensure that all parties were represented and that all of them felt comfortable speaking about issues that they might not necessarily have any expertise. The optimism around online spaces is that they enable people to join the conversation without having to deal with issues of inviting the proper people to represent all the different interests. Additionally, time is no longer a factor, and the fact that time is not restricted allows people to continue to add their opinions to the deliberation. Online spaces have addressed the issues of time and to some extent, diversity of viewpoints, but this is not enough to constitute a public sphere.

Building off of this point, people need to be engaged as citizens on these online spaces rather than just pandered to as consumers. The marketplace ideal very much privileges and prioritizes the consumer above everything else, but this ideal tends to lead to the idea that the customer is always right (Chadwick and May, 2003), and every comment and suggestion that any citizen makes are correct. It is clear from the study that complete freedom of expression without facilitation, rules, and guidelines does not invariably lead to debate let alone conversation. Therefore, there is a need for a facilitator to set up rules and guidelines, but restricting in the traditional Habermasian sense to rational discourse is too restrictive and there need to be more forms of discourse allowed into the conversation.

At this stage, it is still too early to also conclude simply that Habermas assessment of the Internet is correct and that the Internet only can have an impact in special contexts. Additionally, the proliferation of social networking sites has created new forms of connection between citizens and the politicians that represent them. Already, social networking sites are become more heavily utilized in campaigning. However, as Macintosh (2004) points out,

there needs to be much clearer delineation between political communication for campaigning and political communication for policy deliberation. The same strategies do not work in both aspects, and politicians must bear in mind the fundamental contradiction between mobilization for power and deliberation for the public sphere. Public sphere concept revolves around creating a fair system in which the better argument wins than the most popular one, whereas the concept of power is focused on how to mobilize people to take action, regardless of whether it is the best course of action. If the continued conflicts in the Arab Spring are any indication, it is the fact that mobilization and grassroots tools only go so far, and do not create a more stable society (Stephanova, 2011). Even in China where online public forums have enabled people to debate and critically discuss issues in a traditionally authoritarian regime, there have been issues of online mobs forming and personal attacks becoming very frequent (Liu, 2006; Cheng, 2008). The similarities and differences between public spheres around the world is another interesting development that should be investigated further.

Greater specificity is necessary in this area as well, in terms of mobilization as opposed to public debate and development. Public sphere and democracy theories have emphasized consensus on how to move forward, however consensus and agreement does not lead to more effective policies. Just because a person participates by voting or protesting a regime, does not mean they have deliberated the issues carefully or are aware of all the different perspectives on an issue. Therefore, emphasis should move away from merely looking at overt political actions, and not unlike Lukes' (2005) concept of power, add a third dimension to what it means to be an active citizen in society.

### **Limitations**

An obvious limitation of the study cannot be generalized to the greater Facebook population. However, this study does reveal that Facebook interactions can be diverse and complex, and more studies should be done into the dynamics of these Facebook pages and what enables these pages to create conversation and discussion. Additionally, the study does not focus on the identity of the respondents and the politicians. Therefore it is not clear if the respondents were truly representative or if they represented the more extreme views of society on the Internet legislation.

Another limitation, as with other content analysis studies, is that there is no way to determine the intent of the respondent or how much they actually deliberated on the study. It is quite possible some responses were meant to be sarcastic or humorous and these forms of expression could have been mis-interpreted.

However, despite these limitations, the study does reveal that without any facilitation, online conversations can veer off-topic and not focus on judging the merits of the legislation. Additionally, even though politicians were not interviewed or surveyed for this study, it is clear from their lack of substantive interaction with constituents that there is still a façade of interactivity. The limitations of this study also ask new questions of online deliberation in these new deliberative spaces.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

There are still many questions to be answered in this online public sphere debate and the interactions between politicians and constituents. The first obvious need is to study social media use of politicians and how they have implemented social networking site in policy deliberations. It is already quite clear that politicians are using social media for their campaigns, but an equally important aspect of social media is that it creates a deliberative forum. How this environment can be nurtured can only be answered by first investigating politicians' use of social media in non-election years. If the politicians do not manage their pages and responses, who manage their pages on their behalf? How much information is communicated to the politician from their staff? It is not unacceptable for someone else to post on behalf of the politician, but it is not acceptable for a politician to be completely unaware of their interactions through social media. Similar studies have been conducted in New Zealand (Mason, 2008), and this research should be done in different countries as well. Studies should also incorporate politicians and constituents together rather than in isolation, as some fascinating insights can be discerned from surveying or interviewing the perspectives of both parties.

Gandy (2006) and Couldry (2004) offer another interesting perspective on analysing political deliberation further through the concept of the real digital divide. However, the real digital divide should not simply look at consumers' or citizens' behaviour, but also at how certain interactions can be interpreted as consumer or citizen interactions. This study suggests that interactions that forward an argument or sell a viewpoint should be interpreted as a consumer interaction, whereas an interaction in which people actively listen and have a conversation rather than prevail in the argument as a citizen interaction. Differentiating between these two kinds of interactions can help assess the quality of political engagement and involvement.

Another emphasis for research should be to look at who exactly is participating in political deliberations on Facebook. While many studies have used the rationale that Facebook's popularity has exploded and is a good place of study due to its popularity, few studies have

ever questioned the identities of the people online. Studies emphasized that Facebook has opened up to everyone and is no longer restricted to young people. However few studies have noted that the low barrier to entry (an email address is all that is required) could entice people to create fake names or fake identities. BBC (2012) has reported that as many as 83 million users on Facebook could be fake, and just how many of these fake users participate in political discussions on Facebook would be interesting to investigate.

Facebook is still a relatively under-developed arena in terms of political discussion. As this study has revealed, political deliberation can differ significantly from page to page, and these political public spheres are not always deliberative or interactive. What seems to be substantive political engagement can also be mere fandom or mobilization rather than true deliberation. As a result, studies need to be more specific in their definitions of political engagement, political deliberation, and what kind of political communication they are studying. For a long time, political communication has been combined into one field, despite the fact that there are two very different traditions of political communication that have been studied: one that focuses on the creation of power (Castells, 2007) and the other focused on the creation of deliberative spaces (Dahlberg, 2008).

Future research in this field would also benefit from more specific definitions in other areas as well. Public spheres can be fragmented, but the same fragmented spaces also provide a pocket(s) of convergence if these convergent spaces are developed. Deliberation, despite becoming much more convenient and efficient online, still needs to be nurtured and developed. Moreover, many countries have extremely different political systems that can impact on online political deliberation. For example, while much of the focus on authoritarian regimes has been on censorship, not as much attention has been on the deliberation that occurs quite frequently online in authoritarian states such as China. In order to determine the true limitations of the online public sphere, research must move away from merely looking at the public sphere in one context, and begin to compare public spheres in countries in developed and developing countries. While it can be concluded that, to date, the online public sphere has failed to fully materialize in the West, it would be inappropriate to generalize this finding to online public spheres in the rest of the world. Comparative studies of the public sphere could help determine if the same pitfalls that have plagued the online public spheres in the West are apparent in the other parts of the globe.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1- Examples of Zoe Lofgren's Responses

The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook page with several comments and a shared post. The comments are as follows:

- Comment 1: "Thank you for standing tall as a shining beacon of liberty against SOPA. You are a true hero." (January 18 at 6:27pm · Like · 1) - **ZL272**
- Comment 2: "Great idea and as one who has to go after hundreds of copyright infringers weekly for my photos, it's appreciated!" (January 18 at 6:36pm · Like) - **ZL273**
- Comment 3: "I oppose SOPA and PIPA." (January 18 at 6:53pm · Like) - **ZL274**
- Comment 4: "You are awesome!" (January 18 at 8:48pm · Like) - **ZL275**
- Comment 5: "http://www.facebook.com/events/307979380237413/" (January 18 at 9:28pm · Like) - **ZL276**
- Comment 6: "If you want to protect your tech industry, join the blackout." (January 18 at 9:25pm · Like) - **ZL277**
- Comment 7: "What can we get folks to look and like the OPEN Act" (January 18 at 9:32pm · Like) - **ZL278**
- Comment 8: "erson I support your alternative to SOPA and PIPA. Please keep up the good work." (January 18 at 10:24pm · Like) - **ZL279**
- Comment 9: "Do not pass SOPA or PIPA" (January 18 at 10:43pm · Like) - **ZL280**
- Comment 10: "I oppose SOPA and PIPA" (January 18 at 11:11pm · Like) - **ZL281**
- Comment 11: "I support your alternative to SOPA/PIPA. You truly always know what is best for the constituent." (January 19 at 12:34am · Like) - **ZL282**
- Comment 12: "I surely don't want the internet to shut down but there has to be a better way for those of us who make our living thru Intellectual Property creation and licensing to get our material removed without a hassle and a fight and to be compensated. I've found more than 200 infringements today of my copyrighted photos...I'm having a very slow day...." (January 19 at 11:20pm · Like) - **ZL283**
- Comment 13: "Attacking the profit motive for online infringement"? You really don't understand piracy, do you?" (January 26 at 12:25am · Like) - **ZL284**

Below the comments is a shared post by Representative Zoe Lofgren:

- Post: "Five reasons the Internet's still protesting SOPA and PIPA" (www.washingtonpost.com) (January 18 at 11:36am) - **ZL24** 1/18/12/02
- Engagement: 60 people like this, 47 shares
- Comment: "On it." (January 18 at 11:35am · Like · 2) - **ZL241**

 **Representative Zoe Lofgren** ZLT29

Things changed in Washington this week when millions of Americans raised their voices to keep the internet free from censorship. Somewhere in China, thanks to software created in America to avoid the suppression of speech on the Internet, people are watching how a real democracy can work when everyone's voice is heard.

Now that the deeply flawed SOPA and PIPA have been taken off the table, there's a new opportunity to address the problem of misappropriation of protected creative work in a better way. Americans who took the time to raise their voices should be happy to know that they have been listened to.

 **Rep. Lofgren Statement on Decisions to Shelve SOPA and PIPA**  
lofgren.house.gov  
Official Congressional Website.

Like · Comment · Share · January 20 at 3:41pm ·

65 people like this.  
16 shares

Thank you for your leadership on this issue. ZL310  
January 20 at 3:43pm · Like · 3

thank you for all your hard work => We really, really, really ZL311  
January 20 at 3:51pm · Like · 1

Keep watching the watchmen Ms. Lofgren. :) ZL312  
January 20 at 3:53pm · Like · 1

It seems that we already have laws in place to handle misappropriation of protected creative work. Case in point the recent shutdown of Mega Upload and various other sites in the past few years that have been shut down. Has our government actually identified areas that are not currently covered and would require new legislation like SOPA. Are our elected officials being driven by an actual identified need (that is not covered by current legislation) or by perceived need? ZL313  
January 20 at 3:55pm · Like · 1

Thank you Zoe. If only DiFi were a real Democrat. ZL314  
January 20 at 4:26pm · Like Chat (1)



Representative Zoe Lofgren

A couple of people sent me this funny meme of me. Can I be a meme? Thanks to whoever did this. #SOPA



ZLT20

Like · Comment · Share · December 19, 2011 at 10:28pm via mobile

188 people like this.

49 shares

Oh god thats awesome, keep up the good work.  
December 19, 2011 at 10:30pm · Like · 3

ZL177

Ms. Lofgren, are you related to Bill and Jane Lofgren from Rapid City, SD...he is/was a custom home builder and his daughter, Katherine was one of my best friends for quite a while...we even dated for a short time...please respond.  
December 19, 2011 at 10:35pm · Like

ZL178

Oh my god haha, yessss  
December 19, 2011 at 10:38pm · Like

ZL179

so true!!  
December 19, 2011 at 10:59pm · Like

ZL180

Honestly, this is pretty spot on. I get the feeling that the only people involved in the SOPA debate that have any sort of working knowledge of the internet are Representatives Lofgren and Polis.  
December 19, 2011 at 11:17pm · Like · 9

ZL181

## Appendix 2- Inquiries on John Conyers' Facebook Page

Can't you tell the people you represent are AGAINST SOPA and PIPA? Why don't you post your thoughts on THAT TOPIC?  
January 18 at 3:40pm · Like · 2

Sir, any comment on the web protest of SOPA?  
January 18 at 8:09pm · Like

Give us your views on SOPA & PIPA Make this a two way conversation please. Don't hurt the many to help the few profit. There must be a better way!  
January 18 at 6:53pm · Like

## Appendix 3- Instances of Cross-posting on Facebook

**Brandon Moebs** Congressman Chu, your support of the Stop Online Piracy Act proves that you are simply another government pawn in the pocket of Big Business. Your constituents need jobs, not censorship. This is not China, and in the spirit of America I sincerely hope that you are voted out of office come election day.

19 January at 00:10 · Like · 2

Congressman Conyers, your support of the Stop Online Piracy Act proves that you are simply another government pawn in the pocket of Big Business. Your constituents need jobs, not censorship. This is not China, and in the spirit of America I sincerely hope that you are voted out of office come election day.  
January 18 at 6:57pm · Like

CH061

Representative Chu,

I'm contacting you today via the internet. Do you know why I can do that? Because the internet is free and open. It is a place of entertainment, knowledge, communication, and a fusion of all three. It is a place of convenience and progress. In short, the internet is a big part of all our lives, and something many of us could not live without.

The Stop Online Privacy Act, is set to take away the freedom we all know and love. President Obama has even talked about the dangers of such bills. Do bad things happen on the internet, such as piracy of copyrighted materials? You bet. But there are ways to stop such horrible things without also stopping free speech, expression, and press.

Days ago, Wikipedia was completely blocked out in protest of SOPA and PIPA. Google, Reddit, and a plethora of other sites have done similar things. With the passage of SOPA, these websites could become permanently blocked out. Sharing links to stories, videos, and music is what the internet is about. It's how new fads are born and stars are discovered. It's how marketing is done. Very little of this would be possible with these bills, and that is a tragedy of the highest order.

I want to specify here that I'm not writing this letter with a form or from a script. No one is dictating this to me. I've written these words because they are what I truly feel. I've never written such a letter to you or any senator before, largely because I've worried that my voice would not be heard. This issue, however, is simply too large for me to continue my complacency.

Representative Chu, I urge you to vote against SOPA. Protect the freedoms that we are guaranteed in our Constitution, each and every one of us. The internet is about more than just YouTube and Facebook. It's about progress, development, and ingenuity. It has been an integral part of the globalization we have seen over the last decade, and it has been a part of why world economies are still standing, battered though they may be. The internet means more to each of us that we can ever truly express or even know. That includes you, Representative. Do the right thing and protect our internet by voting against SOPA.

Congressman Conyers,

I'm contacting you today via the internet. Do you know why I can do that? Because the internet is free and open. It is a place of entertainment, knowledge, communication, and a fusion of all three. It is a place of convenience and progress. In short, the internet is a big part of all our lives, and something many of us could not live without.

The Stop Online Piracy Act is set to take away the freedom we all know and love. President Obama has even talked about the dangers of such bills. Do bad things happen on the internet, such as piracy of copyrighted materials? You bet. But there are ways to stop such horrible things without also stopping free speech, expression, and press.

Days ago, Wikipedia was completely blocked out in protest of SOPA and PIPA. Google, Reddit, and a plethora of other sites have done similar things. With the passage of SOPA, these websites could become permanently blocked out. Sharing links to stories, videos, and music is what the internet is about. It's how new fads are born and stars are discovered. It's how marketing is done. Very little of this would be possible with these bills, and that is a tragedy of the highest order.

I want to specify here that I'm not writing this letter with a form or from a script. No one is dictating this to me. I've written these words because they are what I truly feel. I've never written such a letter to you or any senator before, largely because I've worried that my voice would not be heard. This issue, however, is simply too large for me to continue my complacency.

Senator Boxer, I urge you to vote against SOPA. Protect the freedoms that we are guaranteed in our Constitution, each and every one of us. The internet is about more than just YouTube and Facebook. It's about progress, development, and ingenuity. It has been an integral part of the globalization we have seen over the last decade, and it has been a part of why world economies are still standing, battered though they may be. The internet means more to each of us that we can ever truly express or even know. That includes you, Senator. Do the right thing and protect our internet by voting against SOPA.

January 21 at 3:07pm · Like

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