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The Role of Events in ICT Adoption: Same-Sex Marriage and Twitter

Matthias Revers

Abstract

ICT adoption is predominantly considered as a process conditioned by social structures, social situations of adopters, and attributes and features of technologies. What is often overlooked are the cultural forces that shape adoption experiences and processes. This paper focuses on events and event narratives as vehicles through which the efficacy of culture unfolds in technological change processes. Cultural sociologists have demonstrated the influence of events for collective beliefs and action. This article considers the power of one event on a much smaller scale: The passage of same-sex marriage (SSM) law in New York in June 2011 was not only significant for marriage equality in the US but also for the operating logic of the news ecosystem in which the political decision was made—the state house in Albany. For the journalists who covered this event on the ground, the SSM decision was the catalyst to fully embrace Twitter. Years later, the event still served as an exemplar for the potentials of Twitter and as a basis of legitimacy of associated tweeting practices reporters incorporated. This contribution is based on ethnographic research at the state house in Albany, analysis of tweets and legacy news coverage published during that period, and in-depth interviews with reporters.

Keywords: technological change, technical change, adoption, diffusion, innovation, implementation, social media, Twitter, cultural sociology, eventness

Research in sociology and communication science explained ICT adoption as conditioned by the structure of social networks and organizational ecologies (Bothner, 2003; Centola & Macy, 2007; Podolny & Stuart, 1995; Stewart, 2007) and socio-demographic differences between adopters and non-adopters (Reisdorf, 2011; Yu, Ellison, McCammon, & Langa, 2015). Other studies emphasized attributes of technologies themselves, including their inherent properties and affordances, popularity of and attitudes towards them (Chan-Olmsted & Chang, 2006; Harambam, Aupers, & Houtman, 2013; Hargittai & Litt, 2011, 2012; Peng, Zhu, Tong, & Jiang, 2012; Vishwanath & Goldhaber, 2003).

From a sociological perspective, the relation between digital technologies and social inequality is of particular importance: Why do some people adopt ICTs quicker or more extensively than others and how to close the gap (digital divide) between them (Norris, 2001)? A conception of this divide as a continuum rather than a dichotomy (Hargittai, 2002) has inspired more complex accounts of digital media adoption. DiMaggio and Garip (2011), for instance, found persistence of the digital divide between different social strata and suppression of positive network effects by forces of homophily.

A prominent analytical approach considers ICT adoption in terms of *diffusion of innovation* (Rogers, 2003) as a process mediated by the structure of social networks. This has been the starting point for research on network influence and the appropriation of digital technologies. Studies emphasized the role of experts in local networks on the adoption and use of ICTs (Stewart, 2007) and found that the adoption of unproven technologies is hindered by too long (thus weak) ties and requires affirmation by a multitude of ties (Centola & Macy, 2007). Considering networks of organizations, one study (Bothner, 2003) found that technological

adoption of peer firms influences smaller and more diversified firms stronger under conditions of competitive pressure.

Other researchers applied uses and gratifications theory, which first emphasized an active role of audiences in media effect research (Katz & Blumler, 1974; Katz & Foulkes, 1962), to explore ICT adoption (Flanagin & Metzger, 2001; Lin, 1999; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). An integrative study found that the diffusion of innovation framework has better predictive power on adoption than the uses and gratifications approach, which in turn is better at explaining degrees of use (Chang, Lee, & Kim, 2006).

This research on technological change examines aggregates of individuals or organizations. Due to this scope and the explanations these studies provide, variation in ICT adoption appears ordered by structural forces. With the exception of constructivist works drawing from science and technology studies, for instance on the implementation and *adaption* of technologies in organizations (Edmondson, Bohmer, & Pisano, 2001; Orlikowski, 2000; Tyre & Orlikowski, 1994), contingency and the role of culture in technological change remains underexposed. Furthermore, the role of events in adoption processes is largely ignored.

The term *event* as it is used in this article has a specific meaning, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section. Generally, events are the result of collective and discursive attribution of meanings to occurrences. Events that are experienced through, influenced or accompanied by ICTs can have profound impact on how these technologies are used subsequently. Even though the case study which will illustrate this argument concerns journalists, the role of events for ICT adoption is by no means limited to media professionals. Our experiences with ICTs, whether we stick with and how deeply we engage with them in our private lives are also conditioned by exceptional moments. Whether ICTs enable us to witness

and communicatively engage in occurrences beyond our geographic purview, to discuss with like-minded individuals matters of common concern, to acquire expertise for solving problems or to enrich and optimize our consumption experiences, we can often point to specific instances when the utility of a technology became apparent to us and after which our use of them intensified. Instances of being turned on to social media, for instance, may range from autobiographical (going abroad) to global events (Olympic Games). And yet, most scholarship does not consider this important dimension of ICT adoption. I will focus on public events in this article, that is, events which evoke attention and debate in the public sphere and which are only perceptible in mediated form for most members of the public.

In media studies, events are often conceived as sources of collective memory and solidarity (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Sonnevend, forthcoming; Zelizer, 1992). Researchers analyzed the role of social media in protest events (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012) but not the implication of these events for technological adoption. With the exception of Belair-Gagnon's (2015) ethnographic work on how the BBC advanced social media practices in the context of crisis reporting, the importance of events for technological change in newsroomshas received little attention. Journalism studies examined adoption of technologies primarily as conditioned by the workings of organizations (Boczkowski, 2004; Nielsen, 2012; Quandt, 2008; Robinson, 2011; Ryfe, 2012; Schmitz Weiss & Domingo, 2010; Usher, 2012), as a result of market pressure and institutional convergence (Klinenberg, 2005), as a clash with the professional logic of journalism (Lewis, 2012; Revers, 2014), and as a combination of economic, political, and cultural efficacies (Kunelius & Ruusunoksa, 2008).

The passage of same-sex-marriage (SSM) law in New York in June of 2011 serves to illustrate the role of events in ICT adoption, in this case the adoption of Twitter by journalists.

The following section makes the case for the power of events as cultural constructs. The analytical section will then show how the same-sex marriage (SSM) decision in New York drove technological change within its immediate news production space.

The Efficacy of Events

Although event narratives draw from shared cultural categories, specific meanings attached to it are subject to negotiation and change. Even though advance planning is often involved, events are mostly defined after they occurred. Processing involves signification, which includes enqueuing further occurrences in event sequences. As a result, later events might dispose previous ones to reinterpretation. Different actors compete for dominant interpretations of events, especially if they have political or symbolic bearing for them. As Jacobs (1996a) demonstrated, competing narratives by different interpretive communities not only shape understandings of an event but also of the communities themselves. Thus, event narratives have identity formative implications.

Following Wagner-Pacifici (2010), however, events include cultural inscriptions and thus meanings are not entirely flexible: Using the example of 9/11, she argued that the horrendous violence which took place on September 11, 2001 in New York was culturally inscribed in the event that was later invoked as 9/11. Such cultural inscriptions in a way serve as potential energy which rests within the event and which can be transformed into kinetic energy when needed, in the case of 9/11 to incite new violence in the form of armed conflict or to pass laws that restrict public liberties.

Where do events derive their power from? Relative to Durkheim's theory of rituals which starts from the premise of physical co-presence, the ritualistic power of *iconic events* is based on "influence at a distance" (Smith, 2012, p. 181), which accounts for the fact that most rituals are

experienced in mediated form today. *Bounding* such an event, that is, provisionally fixating its meaning (Wagner-Pacifici, 2010), involves performative action whose success depends on access to the means of symbolic production and mastery of pertinent cultural representations (Alexander, 2004). Crafting influential representations of events also depends on evoking emotional responses. Evoking empathy as one possible response, especially from a distance, involves a balancing act between creating tangible connections to spectators and presenting, as Boltanski put it, "sufficiently supple descriptions to allow for their reapplication to a fairly extended range of concrete situations whose imaginative fleshing out they will promote" (Boltanski, 1999, p. 51).

Some events are so powerful as to change preexistent beliefs and understandings of historical processes as such (Sewell, 1996). Their power consists of their capacity to structure public discourse by more or less arbitrarily retrieving issues from below the level of public consciousness or purposefully selecting (and omitting), arranging, and accentuating occurrences in event narratives. These retrievals, prioritizations and emphases can have profound implications for normative judgments (Steinmetz, 1992). According to Simon Cottle, the influence of *mediatized rituals* is to "sustain and/or mobilize collective sentiments and solidarities on the basis of symbolization and a subjunctive orientation to what should or ought to be" (Cottle, 2006, p. 415).

Media sociology has had a long-time interest in the mode of operation and influence of journalism in constructing events (Molotch & Lester, 1974, 1975), which most fundamentally involves the emplotment of occurrences into preexistent cultural narratives (Jacobs, 1996a, 1996b; Schudson, 2007), consecration to public rituals (Dayan & Katz, 1992), and collective memory formation (Zelizer, 1992). Dayan (2010) recently underlined the continuing significance

of media events. Besides other elements, he stressed their *performative, gestural dimension*, which means that media events actively construct reality. Daniel Kreiss (2016), drawing on Reed (2013), made a similar argument about the performative power of tweets during the 2012 US presidential election, in conjunction with prevalent factors of network influence and skillful use of discourses to affect representations. He argued that the efficacy of Twitter performances consisted of journalists viewing them as proxies for public opinion, in the first instance, which then shaped evaluations of candidates' success in the race in public discourse.

The journalistic perception of the same-sex marriage decision in New York in June, 2011 as a historical moment was at least partly generated through Twitter. The following section discusses why it represented an iconic event and the inverted effect of this symbolic significance on the incorporation of Twitter in journalistic practice.

Same-Sex-Marriage and the Consolidation of Twitter-aided Reporting

Case and Methods

The choice of the passage of same-sex-marriage (SSM) law in New York on June 24, 2011 as a case for ICT adoption is based on ethnographic serendipity. The decision happened only one week before my ethnographic research ended at the State Capitol in Albany, which focused on the occupational culture of journalism in the US compared to Germany (Revers, 2017). At that point, I had been embedded in the state house press corps since November 2010 and had been doing interviews with political reporters since April of 2009. Reporters of the Legislative Correspondents Association (LCA) in Albany had been communicating, monitoring and coordinating information flows through Twitter some time before the SSM decision. Early adopters were "on it" since 2008, and Twitter had become interesting for several other statehouse reporters during the 2010 gubernatorial run which Andrew Cuomo won. Although Twitter has

gained momentum during the first half of 2011, particularly during the state budget negotiations in March, all reporters talked about in the context of Twitter was the SSM debate when I returned to the field seven months later. Though the larger political importance of SSM was unquestioned, the significance reporters assigned to the event for how they saw and used Twitter more than half a year later surprised me.

The eight follow-up interviews conducted in February 2012 thus serve as the main field research data in this paper. Most of the interview data, which encompasses conversations with 31 journalists from 14 news organizations in the press corps, as well as the observational data remains implicit as contextual knowledge in the analysis presented here. This paper also draws from a content analysis of 4492 tweets generated by 25 of the most important Twitter accounts (individual reporters and news bureaus) in the press corps during the two weeks leading up to the decision. In addition, I closely read 259 newspaper articles on SSM published in June 2011 by the *Albany Times Union*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Times*, *Buffalo News*, *Newsday*, *New York Observer*, and *New York Post*. Most of these articles were authored by LCA reporters and some of them will be quoted here as well.

The Iconicity of the Same-Sex Marriage Decision

Amongst other features, what makes an event iconic, according to Smith (2012), is that 1) its significance exceeds the immediate stakes, 2) its meanings derive from the wider audience and not only its organizers (if there are any) or central protagonists, and 3) there is contention about these meanings. Firstly, even though the decision legalized marriage between homosexual couples in the state of New York, it was seen as a significant moment for LGTB rights in the entire nation. Besides, it constituted another round in the ongoing battle of social liberalism against social conservatism in US politics. Secondly, the New York Governor may have staged

the event but the meanings of this decision were generated in civil society and with the help of influential representatives, such as Lady Gaga or Joan Rivers on the proponent side, New York Giants footballer David Tyree on the opponent side. The voices of influential advocates and protesters served as indicators for the moral weight and divisiveness of the issue, not least to the journalists who covered the debate. Thirdly, SSM was a divisive issue in politics and the broader public sphere and generated much emotive energy and sense of ideological unity among each faction. For weeks, demonstrators for and against SSM occupied the Albany State Capitol, eyeball to eyeball, competing for spatial, visual and auditory dominance in front of journalists and politicians by chanting and singing incessantly.

For both sides the decision marked a sacred event, whether they believed it meant a leap forward in civil rights or the destruction of the institution of marriage. One of the most important aspects of the sacred in Emile Durkheim's understanding is its contagiousness: "Far from remaining attached to the things that are marked with it, sacredness possesses a certain transience. Even the most superficial or indirect contact is enough for it to spread from one object to another" (Durkheim, 1995, p. 322). I argue that the symbolic significance of the SSM decision transferred to one of the spaces in which the debate occurred:Twitter, which was at that point still fairly new to the journalists who reported the event. Before the SSM debate, though many of them were on Twitter, they viewed it as a proverbial echo chamber. When their twitterverse expanded and the "world out there" suddenly became interested in their first-hand accounts on the latest development in the SSM debate, the meaning of tweeting was lastingly elevated.

Measures of Twitter Engagement

In the weeks before the decision, LCA reporters' twitterverse expanded relative to their usual micro universe of state political insiders. They gained followers from all over the country. Many of them may have been activists but were certainly not involved in New York state politics, which constituted the major part of their followers up until that point. To the reporters the twitterverse also became much more interactive and thus resembled the idealized vision of a space for public discussion about issues of common concern (Dahlgren, 2001). According to one of my informants, Twitter made a "quantum leap" during that period in terms of "interactivity and usage" and followers. He said his bureaus' Twitter following "exploded" and estimated a 25-30% increase. Another reporter said he gained more than one thousand followers on his personal account that he opened shortly before the SSM debate.

Mark, who was a quiet, middle-aged wire reporter and editor, was very skeptical towards Twitter but finally gave in, shortly before the SSM debate. To this day, he remains one of the more reserved tweeters in the press corps. Yet SSM still stood out to him eight months afterwards. When I asked whether his followers were predominantly political insiders, he agreed on principle but said: "Gay marriage was different. There were a lot of people all over the country following all of us. … I picked up a lot [of followers] during the Senate chamber when the actual vote was going on. [I know this] 'cause I could see people saying 'follow [his twitter name].'"

Using the archival functions of Twitter, I constructed a measure for the degree of interactivity during that time by counting the number of mentions of each of the 25 Twitter feeds of LCA news bureaus and reporters I analyzed. As a basis of comparison I chose the month prior and after the decision, from May until July 2011, which amounted to 14644 tweets. Interactivity here is approximated by responses to tweets, engaging reporters in dialogue and referring others

to reporters' tweets. The 25 LCA Twitter accounts were mentioned 2107 times in May, 9188 times in June and 2581 times in July, excluding them mentioning each other.[1] These figures suggest not only that the twitterverse was much more interactive in June, especially the week before the SSM law passage, but that interactivity remained relatively high afterwards, despite the fact that the New York State legislature was not in session in July. The attention during the SSM debate seems to have reverberated beyond the decision. As several reporters confirmed, the followers they gained did not leave them afterwards.

[Table 1 near here]

Table 1 displays the frequencies of various forms of Twitter engagement of Albany reporters during the height of the SSM debate, from June 16 until June 28, 2011 when it leveled off. The most prevalent form of engagement was substantive live coverage—which includes statements, decisions, votes—in 31.9% of tweets, followed by 18.8% of "backstage" tweets (situational and procedural information, dealing with political processes and protest action), in which images and videos often augmented textual eyewitness accounts. One percent of tweets made political documents (e.g. press releases, bills, etc.) available. Two percent of tweets informed about the inexistence of news (no-news updates), which is typical at times of heightened anticipation.

Apart from these news-driven tweets, a significant portion referenced other content. All active tweeters promoted their own and their colleagues' news stories and tweets (24.4%). They also frequently referred to and retweeted their competitors (15.9%), though light tweeters did it less or not at all. LCA Twitter feeds are filled with wit and irony and the SSM debate was not an exception (5.8%). Some intense tweeters voiced explicit commentary and criticism about political processes (1.7%), which sometimes overlapped with irony. Hashtags that served to

voice commentary, witty or emotive statements (e.g. #badsign, #ohalbany, #wow) were included in 2.7% of tweets. All tweeters engaged in analysis (4.7%), which involved interpretation, drawing connections, prognoses, historical context and reference to previous political pronouncements and decisions.

Tweeters engaged in dialogue, mostly with other journalists (2.6%) and seldom with sources (0.4%), though this occurred more often in less eventful times. 1.0% of tweets replying to members of the public does not seem like much dialogue but it is relative to regular times—when it is infinitesimal. Occasionally, LCA reporters made use of crowdsourcing (0.5%), which included suggestions for questions they should ask in a press conference. 0.4% of the tweets were corrections of hasty errors and 3.4% were meta-discursive, meaning they discussed journalism and media. Fewer tweets than usual contained personal information (0.4%), which I attribute to long working hours and national attention during that period.

The Collective Construction of the Event on and off Twitter

Journalists are known for their obsession with instantaneity. Their recollections of past events are therefore fleeting.[2] In the case of the SSM debate, however, LCA members talked about it as a significant moment for state house reporting, even years after it had happened. The significance of the event, to put it succinctly, was that it hit home for them (including early adopters) the utility and potential public relevance of tweeting beyond the echo chamber. It made them see Twitter as a means to quickly share pieces of news, to draw attention to and thus create accountability around issues, and engage in dialogue with a more tangible audience (Revers, 2015). Communicative norms of tweeting induced them to be more explicitly critical, to promote their competitors, to be more personally involved in the news making process, and to change

their perception of the ontological status of news, as something developing rather than finite (Revers, 2014).

I argue that the significance for Twitter reporting which reporters attribute to the SSM debate is only partly explicable by the tangible outcomes mentioned in the previous section. For the most part, the SSM debate developed its transformative influence by LCA reporters experiencing and shaping this event together with national media and their audiences. Above all, the Albany journalists inflated and mystified this moment as a social media event retroactively so that other news events before and after paled in comparison. To me as an observer, the budget debate was the decisive moment regarding Twitter adoption. Several reluctant reporters finally opened Twitter accounts in the weeks before the budget deal on March 30, 2011, which were attended by many protesters, if not as many as during the SSM debate. None except one LCA reporter I talked to after June 2011 mentioned the budget debate as a significant moment in the state political twitterverse, however.

The Same-Sex Marriage Debate

In the weeks running up to the SSM decision, reporters left no doubt in their coverage that they believed what they were witnessing might go down in history. Nine days before the decision, the *Daily News* reported of "widespread optimism that the Legislature is about to cross the threshold of history" (Lovett & Blain, 2011). Six days later, the resident columnist of the *Daily News* decried that "the state Legislature's potentially history-making decision on same-sex marriage - an issue of conscience if there ever was one - is getting sucked into the swamp of Albany's back-room horse-trading" (Hammond, 2011).

The impending historic decision was continuously contrasted with the familiar narrative of the dysfunctional New York State government, a narrative that arose after years of

indictments of lawmakers.[3] The historicity of the event shone through only implicitly on Twitter by the breathlessness of constant updates. Small time increments and the 140-character limit did not seem to allow the contemplation necessary to reflect about the larger historical significance of the moment.

The tense atmosphere at the Capitol was not only the subject of hundreds of tweets by these reporters but also legacy news coverage, where they described the scenery as "a political war zone -- complete with bands of troopers keeping an eye on gay marriage demonstrators shouting at each other outside the Senate chamber, empty pizza boxes and hallways that smelled like a high school locker room after days of heat, humidity and masses of human beings" (Precious, 2011a).

Together with the protestors, reporters were growing impatient with GOP Senators, whose overt indecision on SSM was interpreted as a bargaining strategy to push through other pieces of legislation. One reporter noted that, while this strategy bought them time, "it also helped fuel rhetorical battles and raucous demonstrations that have filled the Capitol for the past two weeks" (Roy, 2011a). Besides reporting on political processes and issues at stake, the week before the passage of SSM was also defined by meta-reflection about covering this event, especially the role of Twitter. One early adopter among the Albany reporters noted on June 21 that he "cannot even imagine covering this end-of-session push without Twitter. The times, they are a-changing. #technology" (Campbell, 2011a). Another reporter, who filled in at short notice for a colleague who had just retired, pointed out: "once a twitter skeptic, albany press corps has made me a believer. thanks!" (Deprez, 2011).

The Decision

The tweet by Danny Hakim, *New York Times'* Albany bureau chief at the time, which announced that the SSM bill would come to the Senate floor, was retweeted 196 times (Hakim, 2011). When it finally did come to the vote, one correspondent reported euphorically from the Senate Chamber: "Don't know if I've ever been in a room that's more tense. Suspense has taken over the Senate chamber. #samesexmarriage" (Campbell, 2011b). Besides sensing and reporting the excitement within the physical space of the Senate ahead of the decision, reporters' own excitement was also generated on and through Twitter. There were sixteen tweets alone that documented how many people tuned into the online live feed provided by the NY Senate, which exceeded 46,000. This number was noteworthy because usually only the most hard-nosed dozens of political junkies tuned in.

Aside from this, reporters mentioned other indicators for the exceptionality of the moment in the digital realm: "To give you an idea just how big this story is nationally, 'Saland' is trending on Twitter" (Campbell, 2011c), referring to one of the critical Republican votes on the SSM bill. Another news bureau reported that its flurry of tweets had exceeded the capacity of Twitter: "@capitaltonight If you're wondering what happened to us, Twitter says we hit our Twitter max. So follow us here, please. #whoknew" (State of Politics, 2011).

All of this added additional layers to the sense of exceptionality of the moment, which peaked with the final vote of 33-29 in favor of the bill. Only hours after the decision, one reporter reminisced about the event with an immediate hint of nostalgia: "The scene at 3:45 am Saturday in dark press room in Capitol. Ken Lovett [*Daily News*] and AP still writing, talking of historic gay nups" (Gormley, 2011). The sense of exceptionality induced even the most levelheaded reporters to use the term "historic" in newspaper articles documenting the decision

on the following day: “The State Senate on Friday night passed a historic and bitterly contested bill that will make New York the sixth state to legalize same-sex marriage” (Roy, 2011b).

Aftermath: Assigning Political Significance to the Same-Sex Marriage Decision

The real symbolic weight of the event unfolded in the narrative constructed after the decision, which involved three claims: 1) The legalization of SSM in New York was a historic moment for civil rights in the United States. 2) The law will push nationwide efforts for marriage equality forward.[4] 3) As the crowning achievement of Governor Andrew Cuomo’s first half year in office, the SSM decision marks the beginning of a rebuilding-effort of New York’s dysfunctional government. This narrative was accompanied by speculation of a possible presidential run of Andrew Cuomo in 2016.

The *New York Post*, at that time still strongly supportive of Governor Cuomo, almost fell over itself in praise of the decision: “The historic roll call came after Senate passage of a flurry of Gov. Cuomo-backed proposals that would have otherwise been seen as monumental” (Scott, 2016). Even the *New York Times* framed SSM as a historic decision, albeit in a more indirect way by connecting it another key LGTB rights event, the Stonewall uprising in New York City 42 years earlier (Confessore & Barbaro, 2011). The *Daily News*, whose relation with the Governor had been not nearly as friendly as the *Post’s*, also joined in the praise:

> Gov. Cuomo ran the table in his first legislative session - and restored credibility to New York's broken government in the process. Cuomo's success in getting the GOP-controlled Senate last night to pass a bill legalizing gay marriage was the historic cherry on top of a very successful rookie year. (Lovett, 2011)

According to the *Albany Times Union,* the SSM decision was “a rare reason to feel proud of a state Legislature that's hardly known for votes of conscience” (Churchill & Woodruff,

2011). The *Buffalo News* wrote that the decision followed "weeks of intrigue and marathon protests" (Precious, 2011b), thus adhering to the view of dysfunctional government that otherwise pervaded news coverage from the Capitol. However, the article also emphasized that "advocates said the vote by the largest state to approve same-sex marriage will boost efforts nationwide" (ibid.).

The *Post* was on the forefront of presidential speculation by warning "DON'T call him President Cuomo, yet!" (Dicker, 2011). Not even the *New York Times* could resist joining in these speculations, though not in print. Whereas referral to overall "media speculation" served as a fig leaf for the *Post, Times* journalist Thomas Kaplan used self-deprecation after linking to news stories in the *Washington Post* and Politico that designated Cuomo as a "national figure" and "frontrunner for the 2016 nomination: "And w/ those tweets, I return to my official policy of not explicitly discussing @NYGovCuomo & 2016 until…well, sometime closer to 2016 " (Kaplan, 2011b).

Aftermath: Assigning Journalistic Significance to the Same-Sex Marriage Decision

The political importance of the SSM decision laid the foundation for the significance Albany reporters assigned to this event from a professional perspective, namely as a turning point for how they reported from the state house in the age of social media. Through retroactive metadiscursive reflection about this moment of participatory journalism, relatively speaking, political meanings passed on to professional meanings of the event.

Even to Chuck, who qualified as an intense tweeter since at least November of 2010, SSM was a game-changing moment. He was a reporter in his early forties and in a follow-up interview eight months after the vote he said: "I just found that it was deeply satisfying to send out a tweet about something that, I don't know, Steve Saland said or Roy McDonald [two critical

Republican votes in the decision], and to put it out there and [snaps his fingers] immediately it was passed along to thousands of other people who were either encouraged our outraged by that piece of breaking news." The difference to him relative to a wire story was that "you can *see* in real time who is picking it up." As long as it remained free of advertising, to Chuck Twitter was "something as close to kind of a pure media realm as we've seen so far."

Dan, a columnist and editorial writer in his late forties, had been working as a journalist for 23 years. In our first interview, he told me about the difficult transition from not being supposed to express (or even have) an opinion to one in which you had to have one ready all the time. In our second conversation in February 2012, Dan told me about the much easier shift towards Twitter. He had opened an account in April but started tweeting actively during the SSM debate in June 2011. As Chuck but two years later, Dan was encouraged to start tweeting by one of his editors. He first did not understand what the point of it was but in the context of having "this upfront seat for this big historical moment" he understood why and how Twitter was helpful: to quickly disseminate a piece of news to a large audience, which grows by doing this continuously in a fast, insightful, and humorous way. Once it was clear the SSM vote would come to the floor of the New York State Senate, Dan was "tweeting nonstop." Besides being useful, "there was an actual adrenalin rush to it … I mean it was fun and the idea that people were seeing it and reacting to what you said right away [was exciting]."

Dan acknowledged that SSM was exceptional and that the twitterverse, in which he and his colleagues communicated on a daily basis, was still an echo chamber for the most part. "*But*, every now and then, somebody—I don't even necessarily know if they are from New York at all—will confront me or they'll send a message my way and it will become apparent that they are not in the media business, maybe they are in politics or not, but they can engage with me directly

and instantly and publicly. When they say something to me other people can see what they said." This potential for instantaneous public discussion still fascinated and made tweeting worthwhile to him.

To Rob, a young newspaper reporter who had actively used Twitter for two years before June 2011, the SSM debate "drilled home how important [Twitter] is to getting your work out." Asked about a picture I have of him recording audio with one hand while tweeting with the other, Ron amusedly acknowledged that it was "crazy" but that it was necessary "to survive in this business." The way LCA reporters brought up the SSM debate in conversations about Twitter as late as during my last visit in Albany in March 2014 speaks to what a turning point it represented for them. Another young reporter, early adopter and intense tweeter who I call Jake was very excited to talk about Twitter when I had first interviewed him in 2011. When I talked to him in 2014, Jake reminisced that during my field research Twitter was still optional. During the SSM debate Twitter became a must, he said. Beyond a practical requirement, reporters held on to SSM as the *one* instance when Twitter delivered its participatory potential to them and as justification for why they were tweeting with the intensity they did. As Rob put it in our conversation in February 2012, "you have to keep up with everybody else. … especially during the same-sex-marriage thing every second was important."

Conclusion

Events are often triggers for processes that disrupt orders and transform rigid structures, giving them the necessary momentum to unfold.[5] The fall of the Berlin Wall did not cause the demise of the Soviet Union or German reunification but set off and advanced processes to these ends. After the fact, the event was equipped with symbolic significance which influenced subsequent interpretations, actions, and occurrences. Wagner-Pacifici referred to events as *shape*

shifters for being "essentially a relay of signs and symbols, gestures and exchanges, images and texts … reiterative and reconfiguring at the same time" (Wagner-Pacifici, 2010, p. 1366).

On a much smaller scale, the restlessness of the same-sex marriage (SSM) decision consisted of a bidirectional shift of political and professional meanings. The political significance of the SSM decision fertilized the professional importance of the event for Albany reporters in respect to Twitter-aided journalism. Before the SSM decision, most reporters perceived Twitter as helpful and interesting; afterwards, they deemed it as *indispensable* for modern news reporting. The SSM debate was the catalyst for the irrevocable implementation of Twitter in reporting from the Albany state house, in part because the twitterverse had never been such an engaged open space of public debate before, in part because symbolic recourse to the event sustained the legitimacy of tweeting.

It is not hard to imagine that events have a great impact in many ICT adoption and induction experiences of new professional and non-professional users, partly because of the symbolic significance of the events themselves, partly because such immediacy-demanding and attention-grabbing moments elucidate the qualities of these platforms. Paying attention to cultural forces and event narratives as one way how these forces unfold is useful to better understand why and how users adopt ICTs. Survey and interview research should ask about (life) events through which subjects understood the utility of technologies and decided to incorporate them in their lives. We may also understand better how knowledge about ICTs travels through networks if we also understand the meaning structures in which these networks are embedded in at given moments. If the goal is to not only better understand causal relations, which previous research has done successfully, but also *causal processes* of ICT adoption, culture has to be one dimension to examine.

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[1] These include responses to tweets, tweeting at these accounts, and old-school RTs.

[2] Though Zvi Reich's (2006) reconstruction interviews have shown that journalists remember a surprising amount of details when asked how they reported specific stories.

[3] Since the early 2000s, LCA journalists witnessed numerous New York officials resign or being expelled upon felony conviction, such as embezzlement, bribery, extortion. This long series culminated in late 2015 when two of the three most powerful New York politicians, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos, were independently convicted on several corruption charges (Precious, 2015). The *New York Times* has its own, continuously updated site on this topic titled "The Many Faces of New York's Political Scandals," which currently (in May 2016) lists thirty New York politicians who have "have been convicted of crimes, sanctioned or otherwise accused of wrongdoing" over the last decade (Craig, Rashbaum, & Kaplan, 2015).

[4] Part of this assertion became true in June 2015 when the US Supreme Court ruled that state-level bans of same-sex marriage unconstitutional, even if it is unclear whether the decision in New York had anything to do with it.

[5] Conversely, events may also act as buffers at times of radical change to pause and reassess the situation.