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**FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND
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**Social Networks for Social Change: Looking into Morality and Accountability During Times of National Crises
in the United States**

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**Social Networks for Social Change:
Looking into Morality and Accountability
during times of National Crises in the United States**

Jenna Bresolin

Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
M.A. in Communication

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Abstract

The thesis explores the ways in which Americans on two popular social network sites, Facebook and YouTube, conceptualize the issues of crises, specifically financial, health care, and war, in the name of achieving social change and investigates the two-way flow of communication between the government and its citizens through social network sites. The thesis epistemologically feeds from the works of Thomas Hobbes' (1651) theory of government responsibility to society, William James' (1910) theory on crisis and social change, and Hannah Arendt's (1958) theory on collective action and is further guided by the theoretical frameworks of Jürgen Habermas' (1976; 1989) undistorted communication and public sphere theories and Manuel Castells' (1996; 2007) network and mass self-communication theories. Qualitative content analysis through purposive, quota, and sequential sampling of the comments posted on the White House's social media pages is conducted to gauge citizens' sentiments and conceptualizations.

The findings show that Americans desire change through increased citizen participation in both politics and the community in addition to higher standards of government accountability. Social network sites contribute by providing a method to facilitate government two-way communication through an unprecedented level of speed and accessibility, which is imperative for social change to occur in the new digital age. Social media sites are conducive to social change because they allow for near-universal access despite geographic limitations, promote government accountability and transparency, and provide a public sphere-like environment for debate and conversation, all of which allow for the betterment of society and provide the method through which crises can be assuaged.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Preamble

Never depend upon institutions or government to solve any problem. All social movements are founded by, guided by, motivated and seen through by the passion of individuals.

Margaret Mead, American Cultural Anthropologist

America is at war. The nation that the world once esteemed to the level of a superpower finds itself in the midst of an economic collapse, with the unemployment rate reaching 10 percent and continuing to rise. Large banks that were thought to be infallible succumbed to the crisis, requiring an emergency government bailout numbering in the billions. The iconic American auto industry could not escape the financial plummet, and it too required a bailout and massive restructuring. Dubbed as the financial crisis, the events culminating in the fall of 2008 were prompted by the subprime mortgage predicament, but its consequences reached far greater than those who lost their homes or were laid off. The world financial system was also affected by the crisis originating in the United States, and while the government claims that progress is being made, the road to recovery is undoubtedly long and still unpaved.

Another concern that Americans view as an issue of crisis is the current state of the health care system. 31 million citizens are currently uninsured. A trip to the emergency room without insurance could financially destroy a family. Lack of access to quality care makes purchasing health insurance with an existing condition nearly

impossible, transcending the financial burden on taxpayers and hospitals. The health care debate is a newly revived issue. Former President Bill Clinton in the 1990s attempted passing legislation, continuing with recently elected President Barack Obama running on the promise of health care reform. Different factions exist within the debate, ranging from those who want a single payer system, or a government public option, to those who feel that government intervention in health care, is unconstitutional and innately inefficient.

While facing the crippling financial collapse coupled with the social problem of a health care crisis, the War on Terror continues to wage, draining resources, public morale, and human lives. In December 2009, President Obama announced a troop surge to Afghanistan of 30,000 men and women. More than 5,000 American soldiers have been killed since the war began. While the initial effort was met with majority support both in congress and the populace, Americans are growing increasingly impatient with the seemingly dire situation, especially in Afghanistan. As troops leave one war zone, Iraq, and enter another, and as NATO forces continue withdrawing, the American people are demanding change.

America is at war, not just with an enemy, but with itself. Political factions divide the lines of progress through bipartisan quarrels, rendering passage of legislation a near impossibility. While the notion of change holds various meanings to each citizen, activists and supporters agree that the notion of social change corresponds to the desire for improvement to the current state of the nation. Citizens who engage in the online forums recognize this and are using new media technology to voice their opinions in hopes of not only collaborating with others, but also in an endeavor to bring about real change.

Research Problem and Objectives

Social network members have an unprecedented opportunity to communicate with government on local, state, and federal levels. The Obama Administration has utilized new technology to communicate with citizens in an unparalleled manner, enhancing transparency and accountability to the public. The administration has demonstrated an active interest in pursuing open lines of communication with the public through the heavy use of political social network sites. Doing so is advantageous to both government and citizens. Whereas the former can understand the issues as they appear to the public and foster two-way communication, the latter are able to state their opinions and assist in the facilitation of social change via new media. The public is in a unique position to bring about social change because citizens are not as impeded by barriers to traditional communication with government as they once were. Social network sites allow users to directly communicate their position without the interference of a middleman, whether that interceptor is an elected representative or traditional media.

Because of the Internet's unique ability to connect individuals regardless of geographic limitations and social status, citizens of the United States are able to posit their positions in a public sphere-like arena. Jürgen Habermas (1989) illustrates a social society in which members can congregate to discuss the issues of the day and deliberate on solutions to society's problems. The thesis takes into account Habermas' public sphere theory and parallels the engagement in the online community accordingly. Also following Habermas' prescription for the necessary features of undistorted communication through his four validity claims (1976), the thesis demonstrates that the two-way communicative

interplay between government and the people through online media in the form of social networks fulfills the requirements of valid and transparent communication. Furthered by Castell's (1996) work on networks and (2007) theory on mass self-communication and various other scholars' ideas on engagement in the online community, namely danah boyd¹ (2004) who was among the first scholars to define social network sites, and boyd and Ellison's (2008) work on the purpose of social network sites, the thesis is able to answer important research questions regarding how citizens conceptualize the issues of the crisis and the dichotomy that takes place between the government and active citizens who are interested in participation in the online political world, especially those specifically interested in social change.

Americans are crying out for change, but how can this change be facilitated online? What are the issues that citizens are talking about, and how do they understand these issues? What methods and actions of engagement are needed in order to bring about these changes? The thesis answers these questions by drawing upon the above mentioned theorists, while also modeling the prescription for change by following the suggestions for social engagement and activism by the theorists Hannah Arendt (1958) and William James (1910). The thesis maintains that, based on John Dewey's (1916) theory on the human right to communicate, in order for social change to come about, the passion of the people must be channeled and a consensus must be reached. The foundation and platform for the facilitation of change is the online forum.

Traditional media, newspapers, television, and the like were once the main sources that set the agenda for what the American people talked about and how they

¹ danah boyd does not use capital letters in her name. She explains this on her website, which can be found at <http://www.danah.org/name.html>.

understood, or conceptualized, the issues. Social network sites forgo the barriers that traditional media once presented in that they host a ground for conversation, deliberation, and understanding of the issues. Users can comment directly on the government's site without their comments being edited or deleted. They can state exactly what they think, criticize the government and each other, and promote ideas for social change. Social change has a chance at fruition in the online forum through debate, collaboration, and criticism, whether positive or negative. Users have an opportunity to discuss the issues of importance without the geographic limitations that existed prior to the inception of new media technology. Two-way communication occurs not only between government and citizens, but now among citizens. Social change has an enhanced ability to come to fruition in a manner more rapid than ever before due to the pervasiveness and popularity of the online world; social media do not have gatekeepers.

The purpose of the thesis is to explore ways that citizens in the online community, namely the social network sites of Facebook and YouTube, conceptualize the issues of the crises, and their suggestions to bring about social change, a notion that is synonymous with societal improvement on a national level. Knowing how users understand and discuss ideas regarding the current state of affairs allows the government to posit itself in a unique situation to understand not only *what* citizens are discussing, but *how* they are doing so. Social media affords citizens the opportunity to garner greater government accountability and transparency, which is conducive to not only collaborative social change approaches among citizens, but also fosters the traditional goal of media as the watchdog of government through the newer, more modern advanced approach of the online world. The end result allows the government to understand the dichotomy between

two-way communication methods as it relates to citizens and fulfill its mandate of serving the wants and needs of the people.

Thesis Overview

The thesis examines the issues of the crises and how they are made salient as understood by the American people. It looks at what themes and concepts are repeated and most obvious in the sample as discussed in the online world. Drawing upon Hobbes' theory (1651) on the rights of the people and the responsibilities of government, and further rooted in the work of James' (1910) theories on social change, Arendt's (1958) writings on collective action, and contemporary communication scholars, the main research questions seek to identify what how citizens conceptualize the issues discussed in the public realm, users' publicly articulated goals, and the government response to public's use of social network sites. The thesis finds that the Americans have a pervasive sense of hope despite the widespread problems currently plaguing the country. Wanting greater communication and transparency with the government, citizens often feel obligated to participate beyond voting every four years in order for real social change to materialize.

The findings are divided into three main sections—public perception of crises, namely the economic and health care crises in addition to the War on Terror, the public's sentiments, goals articulated by the public, and the government response. The salience of the issues is examined through the lens of the people; what they are discussing and how they are saying it is vital to social change activists in that it provides keys to understanding what the public expects in an unobtrusive and transparent manner. The government and the media are no longer the sole dominating voices in the national conversation; it is the people's voices that resound loudly within debates.

The rationale of the study is significant. At a time of crisis, the people of the nation are in a unique and integral position to bring about change. During times when the most is at stake is when people will be the most interested and willing to band together to petition the government in hopes of enacting an agreed upon goal. While the exact change that needs to be brought in society is not necessarily always agreed upon among the users of social network sites or even political parties, all maintain that something must change. The fact that individuals are willing to voice their opinions and participate in a political discussion on change lends itself to the notion that change can be brought. Understanding how the American people conceptualize issues and understand the core problems of the nation is vital to social change. For this reason, the study is important because it provides insight into two of the most popular social network sites that the government uses to hold conversation—Facebook and YouTube. Users have the ability to be the facilitators of change by participating in the open dialogue that the government has initiated.

The thesis consists of five chapters—introduction, literature review, methodology, findings and analysis, and conclusion. The literature review found in Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical framework relevant to the topic under investigation. It explains the epistemological roots drawn from the literature, namely Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) and William James *The Moral Equivalent of War* (1910). It discusses the synthesis of key concepts drawn from theorists influenced by the epistemology and examines the findings of researchers in the field of new media communication. Various schools of thought regarding communication with government and social change are examined and provide the relevant path of theory that the thesis follows.

Chapter 3, methodology, discusses the conceptual level of the thesis and reasoning in conducting the research. Conceptualization of issues along with the main research questions are discussed and linked to both the theoretical framework and research problematic. Data collection methods, sampling strategy and selection are also defined. Chapter 4, findings and analysis, provides a summary of the main findings of the study and answers the research questions by conceptualizing the issues and themes that are being discussed in the online forum according to the users' understanding. The government response, along with suggestions for change, is also identified.

Chapter 5, conclusion, provides a succinct summary of the previous chapters and gives a brief discussion outlining why answering the research problems has resulted in important findings and implications for not only the government, but also for participants in the social network sites and proponents of social change. Activists will benefit from the findings of the study because the findings define the problems and make salient the issues that Americans deem the most important. This allows for solid harnessing of the issues and is conducive to finding the most effective ways to enable social change. Chapter 5 concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations in addition to providing suggestions for areas of future research

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The thesis builds a theoretical foundation rooted in the work of two main philosophers—Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) and William James' *The Moral Equivalent of War* (1910)—both of which have influenced modern day theorists in the fields of political science and communication and contributed to threads of knowledge in modern day communication literature. Hobbes' philosophy on the state of nature—the animalistic condition in which man finds himself living outside of a social contract and pre-political society—is applied to the Laws of Nature, which in contracting with a sovereign, delineate his moral philosophy. Hobbes' moral philosophy provides a prescription for both the rights of man in contracted society and the sovereign by whom society is governed. William James expresses a model for social change through community action during times of crisis, specifically war, and philosophically explains the fragile relationship between media, government action, and social uprising.

Although *Leviathan* and *The Moral Equivalent of War* were written nearly three centuries apart, they have both been influential on modern day theories of communication scholars. Accordingly, the thesis is furthered by drawing on Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958) and Jürgen Habermas' (1976; 1989) communication validity claims and public sphere theory, among other contemporaries, whose writings provide an understanding of the relationship between citizen and governmental participation and feedback. Arendt writes of the *vita activa*, or the three fundamental components of life,

labor, work, and action, which can be applied to collective action and societal change. Habermas, also influenced by Enlightenment-era philosophers, such as Hobbes, in addition James, describes the public sphere (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, 1962 translated to English in 1989) and delineates the necessary features of undistorted communication through his four validity claims (*Communication and the Evolution of Society*, 1976). Furthermore, the theoretical framework, which is based on theories of collective action, the right to communicate, and public sphere theory in addition to communication validity claims, assists in exploring the dichotomy between two-way new media communication methods. Drawing from various schools of thought furthers the integrity of the selected authors' theories and, in combination, the synthesis of ideas contributes to the field of communication through investigating ways in which societal change can occur through the use of new media and the unique government and citizen interplay in the online world.

Epistemology

The Laws of Nature

Written in 1651, *Leviathan* was a mature work of Thomas Hobbes' political thought that was conceived during the last few years of his 11 year exile in France. During his lifetime, Hobbes saw the execution of a king, the rise and fall of Oliver Cromwell's commonwealth, and the Restoration. Undoubtedly, these events shaped not only his perception of man and his relation to government, but also the duties that an effective government must carry out in order to ascertain the proper functioning of society.

Leviathan brings the reader through a discussion of the laws of nature, to be further addressed, and provides a model for which the government, or the artificial body that comprises the leviathan, should act.

The main premise of *Leviathan*² centers on the fact that man lives in the state of nature, or an animalistic condition that, without a governing body, he is left to kill or be killed. Asserting that man's interest is solely of himself and for himself, Hobbes describes life in this circumstance as, in perhaps what is the most widely recognizable and quoted verse in *Leviathan*, The selected scholars contribute differing and divergent schools of thought that represent a well-rounded view of communication, from a political and public-sphere perspective. Usage of these particular scholars was for the purpose of implementing specific threads of knowledge that they have contributed to literature, not their overall ideas or major works in their entirety. (1651: 14). Because of man's vulnerability in the state of nature, referred to as the natural condition of mankind, one can only find true protection, hence freedom, by attaining peace, which can only be acquired by engaging in a social contract with a sovereign. Hobbes describes the sovereign as the *leviathan*, a figurative body composed of all the beings in society. Without the protection of a sovereign,

there is a perpetual war of every man against his neighbor, no inheritance to transmit to the son or except from the father, no propriety of goods or lands, no security, but a full and absolute liberty in every particular man.

(Curley, 1994: 134)

In contracting with the sovereign, society establishes a commonwealth and members voluntarily surrender all rights to the governing body. Although in the state of nature man

² When the thesis references *Leviathan*, the edition of 1688 edited by Curley (1994) is used.

has the will to do whatever he pleases for his own gain, he is in fact limiting himself since he will not be able to prosper indefinitely. Without engaging in a social contract, man is not afforded protection from those with whom he lives and will spend his entire existence fighting to stay alive. Hobbes attributes fear of danger and death as the worst quality of the state of nature (Owen, 2005). Surrendering his rights to the government grants man protection and a chance to acquire peace.

While Hobbes stipulates that man needs an absolute sovereign, he did not demand that the citizens of the commonwealth be absolutely obedient to the ruler (Sreedhar, 2008). The social contract requires that man surrenders all but one of his rights to the sovereign, which is the right to defend oneself. While one can relinquish his power and live under laws and regulations, it is against human nature to allow oneself to be harmed or killed, and as such, one is morally obligated to preserve his own life (Ibid). In doing so, man finds freedom that would otherwise be impossible in the state of nature, "A Free-Man, is he, that in those things, which by his strength and wit he is able to do, is not hindered to doe what he has a will to" (1651: 21). Hobbes' position is that without a ruling body, members of natural society will be at constant war, and survival will only be afforded to those who can adequately protect themselves.

Hobbes also lays out the responsibility of the sovereign to preserve the rights of his subjects as per the terms of the established social contract and differentiates the expectations of the sovereign in contrast to those of his subjects. The state of nature allows people to do what they see fit in their own eyes. Contracts, therefore, cannot be valid in the state of nature since it would not be in the interest of both parties to uphold the agreement. It is for this reason that subjects give up all of their rights to the sovereign

to ensure protection for all, a concept known as reciprocity (Lloyd, 1992). The sovereign, however, is exempt from reciprocity,

As the source of authoritative public judgment on *all* questions, the sovereign must, as a conceptual matter, retain the right to judge questions concerning itself; and reciprocity licenses this because each party to the originating covenant would fault the others for refusing to join in the creation of a sovereign for their mutual benefit.

(Lloyd, 1992: 26)

In other words, the sovereign encompasses all of the qualities that his title implies; independence, autonomy, superiority, and basically self-governance. Entrusting a sovereign with absolute power, though it innately poses certain disadvantages, is a preferable situation to not having a governing entity and living in the state of nature unprotected (Piirimäe, 2006).

Hobbes identifies the three “principle causes of quarrel”, or origins of problems that attribute to the conditions in the state of nature; competition, diffidence, and glory. These motivations are the catalyst behind the strife that inhibits peaceful coexistence.

The first, maketh men invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for reputation. The first use violence, to make themselves masters of other men's persons, wives, children, and cattle; the second, to defend them; the third, for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their persons, or by reflection in their kindred, their friends, their nation, their profession, or their name.

(1651: 185)

Acting on such desires is not committing a wrong-doing since, in coherence with the state of nature, there are no laws to govern people to act otherwise. “To this war of every man against every man...The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law: where no law, no injustice” (1651: 115).

As the first cause of quarrel, power is identified as man's "...means to obtain some future apparent Good" (1651: 62). Hobbes differentiates between two types of power, natural and instrumental. Natural power is identified as, "the eminence of the faculties of body, or mind: as extraordinary strength, form, prudence, arts, eloquence, liberality, nobility." (Ibid: 74). Instrumental powers are those acquired by chance, such as "riches, reputation, friends, and the secret working of God, which men call good luck" (Ibid). The desire to acquire more power is not due to the lack of resources in society, such as food or shelter, but man's innate desire to always obtain more (Piirimäe, 2006). The relentless desire and endeavor for it makes power a dangerous object, hence it is Hobbes' first cause of quarrel.

Because of man's endless seeking of power by any means in the state of nature, the second cause of quarrel is directly linked to the first. Diffidence, or lack of trust in others, creates a climate of mutual fear (Ryan, 1996) that leads people to constantly worry about their own lives. Living in a state of perpetual fear and imminent danger will cause one to do anything and everything possible in order to get ahead of the other, even at the cost of another's life. Furthermore, the troublesome condition of the state of nature is that,

as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he. For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest...that are in the same danger with himself.

(1651: 110)

Diffidence, the second cause of quarrel, is especially problematic in that it is furthered by the fear of natural aggressors, or those who choose to seek power beyond what they need to ensure their survival. Because no one can guarantee their superiority over anyone else,

all are potentially able to wreck havoc on one another, regardless of their strength or assumed capabilities. Living in perpetual fear of death is, for Hobbes, the worst aspect of the state of nature.

The third and final cause of quarrel Hobbes identifies is glory. As the second cause of quarrel builds on the first, so does the third. By glory seeking, Hobbes implies that with recognition, individuals in the state of nature are less likely to wage attack on him, since the value of one is grounded in the price that another is willing to pay to acquire his power. In accordance with the conditions state of nature, seeking glory is natural to man because he will do everything he can to preserve his life. Because man engages in an endless struggle to secure his own safety, he relentlessly will find ways to glorify himself and make his perception to others one of power and might. Showing preemptive power is man's way of securing his safety.

Although *Leviathan* devotes a significant amount of explanation to the terror-filled world outside of a social contract, it does so to present a strong argument for Hobbes' solution to the chaotic and dysfunctional social system that can be rectified through the adherence to his 19 Laws of Nature that, in sum, are known as his moral philosophy. They are called laws of nature because, contrary to civil law, they are not written down, but rather are innate to human beings and are discovered through reason. For the purpose of this thesis, the first three Laws of Nature, central to the social contract, are examined.

As noted, among Hobbes' main theses is that civil society and peace can only exist through the construction of a social contract. Knowing how Hobbes viewed the state of nature allows one to understand his first law, which is "*to seek Peace, and follow it*"

(1651:80). Without peace, life would not be possible since, in the state of nature, man is at war with one another. Seeking peace is in accordance with the mandate that one must protect himself since it is a natural right to do so. Building upon the first law of seeking peace, the second law stipulates,

That a man be willing, when others are so too, as far-forth, as for Peace, and defense of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself.

(1651: 190)

One is required to release his power to the sovereign in order to be afforded protection and rights. Doing so does not mean that he is renouncing his rights, but according to Hobbes, he is transferring his rights to an entity that can effectively ensure equal protection for all in the commonwealth. Hobbes makes a point to differentiate between transferring and renouncing rights, as renouncing implies a lack of concern for the recipient of these rights, whereas transferring is a conscious act designated specifically to a sovereign. “Whensoever a man transferreth his right...it is either in consideration of some right reciprocally transferred to himself; or for some other good he hopeth for thereby. For it is a voluntary act...” (1651: 192). The good of which Hobbes speaks is the social contract, “The mutual transferring of right, is that which men call CONTRACT” (Ibid: 193).

The third law of nature is the core foundation of justice, in mandating that we must keep our contract with the sovereign in order for the contract to be valid. If man does not honor his contract, “covenants are in vain, and but empty words; and the right of all men to all things remaining, we are still in the condition of war” (1651: 201). Breaking the social contract bears societal significance in that it perpetuates the condition

of the state of nature, and consequentially, also breaking the first and second laws of nature, which are to seek peace and transfer rights. To break the contract would be an injustice, which Hobbes defines as “*the not performance of covenant*” (Ibid, *emphasis in original*). Hobbes’ insistence on the importance of maintaining the social contract is furthered by his urging on following civil law in society (Kow, 2005). To abide by the social contract is in fact to preserve one’s own life. Although the need for “competition, diffidence, and glory” are at the apex of the human interplay, Hobbes stipulates that man must put his selfish desires aside if not for the well-being of others in society, but for the preservation of his self.

The overall premise of *Leviathan* can be understood at surface level by merely studying the original book’s cover, which depicts a king whose body is comprised of its subjects. It is interesting to note that the subjects are facing the king, or leviathan, indicating their submission to his rule. Written overhead of the piece is an excerpt from the Old Testament book of Job³, which reads, “there is no power over earth than compares to him” (1651: 33). The leviathan is the body that, although whose fibers are woven of those who grant its authority, ultimately acts as the disciplinary as much as the protector.

Social Change via Citizen Action

Hobbes lived during an era of political upheaval coupled with social breakdown and reconstruction, similar to the situation in which William James found himself during the

³ The name *Leviathan* is a reference to the beast of the Apocrypha and is related to the Second Coming of Christ. See Slomp (2008: 354-355) for a discussion on the significance of the term.

20th Century. In his 1910 writing, *The Moral Equivalent of War*, James claimed that society comes together during times of hardship, namely the eminent threat of war. According to James' observations, society's perception of war and conflict directly shape and influence the course of action that the government will take. "The popular imagination fairly fattens on the thought of wars. Let public opinion once reach a certain fighting pitch, and no ruler can withstand it" (1910: 164).

Originally presented as a lecture, *The Moral Equivalent of War* begins with an account of the innate human desire for war, exemplified in Greek history, where the blood of men was shed in a manner of "war for war's sake" (1910: 163). James attributes his society's affinity for war to the fact that ancestral societies thrived off the excitement and glory that is intrinsic to conquest when he says that, "We inherit the warlike type; and for most of the capacity of heroism of which the human race is full we have to thank this cruel history" (Ibid: 164).

In addition to ancient society being a contributing factor as to why modern day society thrives from engaging in war, James assigns much of the blame to the media and government's propensity for reacting to popular demand. In drawing on an example of the Spanish conflict in the late 19th Century, he writes:

In 1898 our people had read the word WAR in letters three inches high in every newspaper for three months. The pliant politician McKinley was swept away by their eagerness, and our squalid war with Spain became a necessity.

(1910: 165)

James alleges that the word "war" is so provocative and appealing to society that no government should allow it to be printed in a newspaper if attaining and maintaining peace is a true goal of that government. He furthers his claim by accusing society for

desiring war to such a degree that the preparation for war is in fact the apex of enjoyment of the eminent conflict, “permanent, unceasing; and that the battles are only a sort of public verification of the military mastery gained during the 'peace'-interval” (1910: 165).

As a self-proclaimed pacifist, James despised war, yet did not neglect to recognize the potentially beneficial side to the impassioned drive of society’s desire for war. Observing that national consensus could directly influence governmental action, he maintains that society can in fact change through action. In recognizing a mutually-reliant relationship between the individual and the community, he finds that an individual could develop his or herself while contributing to the good of the greater community; therefore, action according to James is an opportunity for not only self-sacrifice, but also for self-fulfillment. (Miller, 1997). Participation in action elicits not only a sense of self-efficacy, but also passion, which according to James should be channeled from the desire to engage in war to a social catalyst prompting the change that society demands. James writes that ideals should be transferred from the minds of individuals to their actions for the sake of betterment for the community. Therefore, the energy transmuted from passion should be reassigned to political endeavors and social impetus for change.

Although James contends that war is “the only force that can discipline a whole community” (1910: 172), he identifies two channels of action that satisfy his pacifist position of change, while simultaneously enhance democratic participation and advancement of society. The first calls for overall public service in all areas of life, including the arts and humanities, medicine, technology advancement, and other related fields. The second type of action is individual in nature, yet paradoxically encompasses

the community at large. He says that one can contribute to the “welfare” of the “human race” by:

discovering some moral truth, relieve its pain by concocting a new patent medicine, save its labor by a bit of machinery...open a road, help start some social or business institution, contribute your mite in *any* way to the mass of the work which each generation subtracts from the task of the next; and you will come into *real* relations with your brothers...

(James, 1920: 130-131, *emphasis in original*)

James suggests that the medium through which change can take place is through a visionary who retains the foresight to organize and lead the community in identifying the desired goal and successfully drawing people to supporting the cause (Miller, 1997). As explained in *The Will to Believe* (1898), James writes that citizens and their leaders possess the potential to decide the course of change and act upon it to bring about the desired goals and benefit for a collective society. At the apex of James’ political model of action is individual contribution to the greatest capacity possible, which in concert with the efforts of the community, is great enough to initiate social change.

While James recognizes the positive potential for citizens’ war-like spirits, he does not ignore the plausibly problematic, if not dangerous, situation that could arise from impassioned spirits. The human instinct for war could be manipulated and encouraged by politicians and the media beyond society’s initial and underlying desire. James witnessed the potential for public opinion to be swayed during the Spanish-American War in 1898.⁴ Therefore, among the central tenets of *The Moral Equivalent of*

⁴ James particularly despised Hearst’s yellow journalism for this reason (Skrupskelis & Berkeley, 1994). The term “Yellow Journalism” originates from the late 1800s and the alleged sensationalism in New York City newspapers that occurred during coverage of the Spanish-American War. See Campbell (2004).

War, it is crucial that society reaches a consensus on actual desired outcomes of social changes free from the influence of political bodies or media outlets.

Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* paints a vivid depiction of pre-political society in which all looks out for his own advancement, regardless of the cost on fellow man. The state of nature, according to Hobbes, is a place of near solitary confinement in that man adopts an attitude of all for one and none for all. In order to evade a life with a definite brutal death sentence, Hobbes states that engaging in a contract with a governing body, or the leviathan, one must transfer his rights to the sovereign in order to assume the requisite protection needed to survive. Similarly, James recognizes society's dangerous propensity for glory seeking, much like Hobbes' third cause of "quarrel". James warns of the dangers of human passion and the ability for unnecessary war to brew simply because of society's impassioned desires. He asserts that members of society should turn their collective passion into action for social change and the betterment of the community.

As an Enlightenment-era philosopher, Hobbes' thesis has undoubtedly influenced modern day scholarship on governmental and societal relations. James' writings have brought inspiration to social change activists, and the two philosophers together bridge a gap from classical lessons in philosophy to be applied to a modern day context. The following section discusses the principles and writings that have been influenced by the previously presented scholarship, and presents the collaboration of epistemological ideas that have contributed to the creation of new theories on social issues and communication.

Theoretical Framework

The previous section, epistemology, explores Hobbes' *Leviathan* in order to establish an understanding on the way through which citizens are accountable to government and government responsible to citizens. It discusses the purpose of transferring rights to a sovereign power in order to ensure the protection of society at large from the violent nature of man. James' *The Moral Equivalent of War* creates a lens through which we can understand the human drive for war and the potential of the media and governmental interplay on social cohesion. The following section draws on modern day theorists whose works are influenced on a fundamental level by the two above mentioned writings. Their contribution to the literature provides a modern day insight and interpretation on government, citizen action, and communication.

Collective Action

Hannah Ardent (1906-1975), much like Hobbes and James, lived in an era of political turmoil. As a German Jew, she narrowly escaped the horrific events of the Holocaust. Her works, especially those centering on her perception of government-citizen relations are unequivocally shaped by the events that culminated in her lifetime. As a young philosopher in a predominately male field, her prolific writings examine human social interactions and societal change through collective action. *The Human Condition* (1958) provides a broad discussion of what Ardent thought of democratic participation in the social life.

Arendt begins her discussion of democratic participation, the dominant theme in her political philosophy (Cooper, 1976), vis-à-vis citizen action with a broad discussion

of the *vita activa*. In the *vita activa*, the three “fundamental” components of life are described, each “corresponding to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man” (Arendt, 1958: 7). Arendt delineates the functions of labor, work, and action in society. While at first reading labor and work may appear synonymous, they are in fact two distinct entities that play an integral role in the *vita activa*.

The first component, labor, is explained as the biological functions of the body—growth, metabolism, and decay—vital necessities that comprise life itself. She views labor with a critical lens because of its unceasing and redundant nature. Each day, man toils to eat and survive. At the end of the day, he retires only to begin the entire process all over again the next day with nothing to show for it, a fact that Arendt believes causes man to be “imprisoned in the privacy of his own body, caught in the fulfillment of needs in which nobody can share and which nobody can fully communicate” (1958: 118-119). Despite its futile nature, Arendt writes that labor is a necessary and unavoidable component to life when she states:

Unfortunately, it seems to be in the nature of the conditions of life as it has been given to man that the only possible advantage of the fertility of human labor power lies in its ability to procure the necessities of life for more than one man or one family.

(1958: 118)

The drive for labor, although necessary according to Arendt, is the catalyst for the problems in modern day society because labor takes place in the “social realm”, the term she uses to describe society. She writes that society is “the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance” (1958: 46). The emergence of society has changed the state of nature, according to

Arendt, in that “the survival of the species could be guaranteed on a world-wide scale, can at the same time threaten humanity with extinction” (1958: 46).

Arendt believes that the social realm has been the foreground for a life process that has established its own domain of “unnatural growth”, mixing the lines of the public and private realm. Because of this, she argues that work and action have suffered the loss of their significance in greater society. “The goals of our society are unlimited abundance and unending consumption--not durability or permanence, which are the ideals of the *homo faber* (man the maker)” (Cooper, 1976: 159). In summary, she criticizes labor because it now equates to everything we do simply to “make a living” (Levin, 1979: 6).

Work is distinguished as the toil of the hands, in contrast to labor, which is the effort of the body, and is said to provide an “artificial” world distinct from natural surroundings. The human condition of work, therefore, can be understood as worldliness. The goal of work is to create lasting objects that lend themselves to providing stability in an ever-changing world (Weisskopf, 1960). In order to understand the significance of work, Arendt draws on an anecdote of tilling the soil to enjoy the literal fruits of labor that emerge as a result. The act of planting crops does not just provide a daily wage, but rather, is an investment on mankind and that tilling the soil “procures means of subsistence, but in this process prepares the earth for the building of the world” (1958: 138).

Arendt describes action as the final component of the *vita activa*, and contrasts her definition of action in the public and private realm to the depictions of Plato and Socrates, specifically in regards to the importance of action versus speech. In the Greek polis, for example, emphasis was placed on the thought and speech of the philosopher, as

opposed to his actions. Arendt expands the Greek model of thought to include action and speech as one in the political life. In a symbiotic relationship, action and speech cannot effectively exist without each other.

Without the accompaniment of speech, at any rate, action would not only lose its revelatory character, but, and by the same token, it would lose its subject, as it were; not acting men but performing robots would achieve what, humanely speaking, would remain incomprehensible.

(1958: 178)

Speech is elevated in significance among the other components of the *vita activa* since it is conducive to making man a political being. Without action, man would not be enabled to gather with peers and to act in concert or reach mutually agreed upon goals, all of which are central tenets to acting as a political being. Speech, consequently, is more important than action because, according to Arendt, it possesses the unique ability to reveal the nature of the self.

Action and speech are only useful, however, within the context of the public realm, an undoubtedly important feature of the *vita activa* to which she devotes a lengthy discussion in *The Human Condition*. The public realm is elevated since it is the place in which political action occurs and where collective endeavors coupled with self-expression culminate. Speech and action perpetuate the public realm, and conversely, the public realm fosters the home for which political action in the form of speech can occur. Hence, she defines society as, “the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public” (1958: 46).

Through open society, man engages, similar to Hobbes’ proposition, in a social contract. The purpose of the contract is to keep the “public space in existence” (1958:

245) and lends itself to the notion of public sovereignty. She writes that through a social contract, the sovereignty “of a body of people bound and kept together...by an agreed purpose for which alone the promises are valid and binding, shows itself quite clearly in its unquestioned superiority over those who are...unbound by any promises” (1958: 245). In other words, the social contract is meant to assist man in reaching political goals, is advantageous to political participation, and adherence to the contract is the only way through which legitimate political endeavors can be realized.

Arendt is careful, however similar to Hobbes in the adoption of the social contract, to distinguish herself from his philosophy on the state of nature. She does not adopt Hobbes’ view of a violent state of nature, but rather, takes the approach of a social contract based on the ruler and those who are ruled. Largely discussed in her work *On Revolution* (1963), Arendt emphasizes the purpose of contracts is to bind citizens together for collective purposes, granting power of the masses greater strength. She writes, “Action... (and) power...combine in the act of foundation by virtue of the making and keeping of promises, which, in the realm of politics may be the highest human faculty” (1963: 175, as quoted in Cooper, 1976). Alternatively, Arendt views politics and freedom through the application of participation and common action, not the hierarchy of rule between a leviathan-type figurative ruler and a body of people.

The goal of *The Human Condition* is to delineate the two major aspects of human action; to discover the permanent capacities of human beings and establish that action rather than contemplative thought is the “apex of human endeavour and achievement” (Bradshaw, 1989: 100). Placing emphasis on the importance of action rather than thought was a divergent view from the Western creeds of philosophy, and in doing so, Arendt’s

thought called for the formulation of a new theory on the purpose of human life, and hence, the categories of labor, work, and action were established. While one cannot function and be properly understood without the two others, the categories each hold their own relevance in the hierarchy when discussed in relation to one another.

In the hierarchy, action takes precedence among the three components of the *vita activa*, however, when labor and work are juxtaposed, work is superior. The reason for this is because work is conducive to plurality and community, whereas labor promotes the advancement of a singular effort (Bradshaw, 1989). Arendt articulates the place of action in the hierarchy of the *vita activa* when she states that “action alone is the exclusive prerogative of man: neither a beast nor a god is capable of it, and only action is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others” (1958: 22-23). The previous statement clearly exemplifies the importance of action within a plural manner, introducing Arendt’s main thesis of action via community effort.

What makes bearable the contemporary life, or the darkness of the modern world, is Arendt’s classical Greek view of the “free life of political action” (Levin, 1979: 527) through participation in the polis, allowing one to permanently etch their contribution on political society. The futility of human labor is negated by the possibility of an immortal existence through participation in political society. As Lee, articulates, “It represents what is unique, lasting and free in being human, as opposed to what is uni-form, passing and necessary” (1994: 842). Political action, in turn, is accomplished through plurality.

Plurality, or the coming together of the three components of the *vita activa*, is the main catalyst for change and is the keystone of Arendt’s model of action and speech in society. Arendt places prominence on the relevance of plurality throughout *The Human*

Condition, in asserting that action “corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world” (1958: 7) and that “all human activities are conditioned by the fact that men live together” (Ibid: 22). Consequently, in Arendt’s model, plurality is the center of public life (Poyntz, 2009). Man cannot act alone as the vehicle for change; rather, it is only through a pluralistic approach that action can be maximized, if not realized at all. Action, plurality, and communication hold for Arendt the ground of all meaning in society (Bradshaw, 1989). In summary, “*Action entails speech*: by means of language we are able to articulate the meaning of our actions and to coordinate the actions of a plurality of agents. Conversely, *speech entails action*” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2006, *emphasis in original*).

Speech is crucial to action and vice versa because it reveals the nature of the self, according to Arendt. Existing in the public realm, speech and action make possible the disclosure of the self. The nature and entity of our being is revealed when we disclose ourselves in a public manner. Arendt states that action and speech “are so closely related because...the answer to the question...’Who are you?’...is implicit in both his words and his deeds” (1958: 178). She goes on to affirm that action and speech cannot exist without each other since, “Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words” (Ibid: 179). It is common sense in Arendt’s view that speech and action exist in unison to accomplish a goal or establish a fact publically; therefore, they are of equal importance when placed together.

The Right to Communication and Related Scholarship

As a contemporary of James, John Dewey, whose work focused on the main principles of freedom and democracy, recognizes, similar to Arendt, that communication is an imperative component for the system of democracy and is a way of social life (Dakroury, 2009). Like Arendt, Dewey does not view democracy in the form of a politically organized entity, but rather conceptualizes it as social life in and of itself. Dewey contends that “public discussion is a political duty” (1935: 66). He maintains the importance of political activism through social interaction when he states that:

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience...equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity.

(1916: 87)

Dewey (1954) does not view the public as a mere audience, instead, he thinks of the public in a plural sense existing as “discursive interactional processes” (Dahlgren, 2005: 149).

Dewey’s scholarship also lends itself to the relatively new field of thought on the right to communicate. He contends that public discussion is a political duty, but members of society must first be granted the right to speak before discussion can commence. The study of the right to communicate is attributed to Article (19) of the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of 1948 (UDHR) (Raboy, 2004), although the term *right to communicate* originated from French Scholar Jean d’Arcy (1913- 1983). The right to communicate is a concept that has emerged in the research field during the last 30 years (Dakroury, Eid & Kamalipour, 2009). d’Arcy’s article (1969) entitled, “Direct broadcast satellites and the Right to Communicate”, in which he predicted that

future technologies would enable unprecedented opportunities for advanced global and collaborative communication was the platform through which he coined the term.

Given the groundbreaking information that d'Arcy presented, the field of communication has seen debates on the exact definition of the right to communicate, and accordingly, can be identified in two phases. In order to reach a definition for the purpose of this thesis on the right to communicate, it is helpful to take a brief look at the history of the schools of thought on the various interpretations of the phrase. Calabrese (2004) identifies two distinct episodes of the debate's evolution. The first phase lasted approximately one decade, commencing in the 1970s, and took place at the governmental level. The second phase that pervades the literature is the debate that took place within society and was spurred mostly by non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The debate first gained global attention at the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) General Conference in 1974 when Sweden introduced the concept. Cultural differences permeated the parties involved in the debate, and an East versus West cultural war ensued, the former citing more state control and the latter urging for the increased free flow of information. Western countries, such as the United States were accused of engaging in cultural imperialism, trying to pervade its ideals through media in foreign countries. As a result, the MacBride Commission was established to quell the controversy. The report, *Many Voices, One World* (1980) found that the right to communicate needed to be expanded upon to include other issues such as the right to privacy, information, etc., before the right to communicate could be effectively articulated. The issue was not resolved on the

international level, and by 1984, the United States disassociated with UNESCO. (Dakroury, Eid & Kamalipour, 2009).

The second phase of the debate entered society when NGOs and various civic groups brought the issue to the table in attempting to work with governments to increase citizen access to information, equality in media, Internet activism, and community radio. NGOs were said to cause “pluralization” with government (Gordenker & Weiss, 1996), and brought communication rights issues under public light after the failed deliberations of UNESCO. Because of NGO collaboration with governing institutions and their insistence on access to information via open communication has enabled, “non-governmental organizations, civil society and the private sector to contribute to, and actively participate in, the intergovernmental preparatory process of the Summit and the Summit itself” (UN GA Resolution, 2001, cited in Dakroury, Eid & Kamalipour, 2009: 161).

The debate over the Right to Communicate has also found increased attention in academic literature. Although scholars find that the notion of rights to communication originate from seventeenth century philosophers (Dakroury, 2003), it is still an issue that needs constant reexamining and can only function through a paradigm with continual revision in an ever-changing world. It is relevant because communication is a central aspect of the social structure, lending itself to be understood on political terms. This thought process is the basis for the concept of a political opportunity structure in which, “dimensions of the political environment that either encourage or discourage people from using collective action” (Tarrow, 2005: 23). Political opportunity structures are relevant, although “vague” (Mueller, Kuerbis & Page, 2004: 181), because they provide an

advanced method of promoting various changes, legislative, social, or otherwise, to problems that are encountered in advancing communication rights.

Although d’Arcy does not provide a cohesive definition of the right to communicate, he prescribes a model for which the right to communicate could be implemented on both individual and national levels. He suggests that a national communication policy that empowers governments to implement legislation and provide citizens with formidable access and maintenance to communication mechanisms be established. He also identifies the need for governmental enforcement of policy through a horizontal network of communication that distributes information equally among citizens. d’Arcy’s third and final component of his model includes his authoring of the term “communicativeness” in which he differentiates between the media and communication; the former is a vehicle and a means to an end, whereas the later is a two-way process. (Dakroury, 2009).

d’Arcy also recognizes the potentially dangerous side of communication, which he maintains is regulation. d’Arcy fears that governments would manipulate the public discussion, thereby violating individual’s right to the free flow of information and discourse, when he says that, “The entire history of mankind bears witness to the fact: whoever controls communications controls society” (d’Arcy, 1982: 3).

Public Sphere Theory and Validity Claims

d’Arcy identifies communication as an “interaction and involves participation in a two-way process” (Dakroury, Eid & Kamalipour, 2009: 35). Jürgen Habermas, like d’Arcy, recognizes communication in terms of a two-way exchange, but furthers his view through

encompassing the public sphere. In Habermas' theory, the public sphere could be comprised of two people discussing society, or make up a larger social movement. According to Habermas (1989), the public sphere originated from a bourgeois society in the 1800s and, as industry, society, and commerce revolutionized throughout the years, the public and private realms became unique entities in which the public could critique government and various institutions.

Habermas (1979) contends that in order to communicate effectively, one must do so through universal validity claims which, firstly, state that one must express something coherently, give the receiver of the message something to understand, make himself understandable, and thus come to a point of understanding with another. In order for social change to occur, all components of Habermas' prescription for undistorted, and thus effective, communication must be implemented both within society and society's communication with government via new media.

Through his four validity claims, it can be surmised that communication must be responsible. The speaker is obligated to provide clear and undistorted communication to his audience. Such a claim lends itself to a framework for government accountability and honesty through a policy of transparency. Secondly, Habermas proposes that the speaker must give the receiver something to understand. From this, it can be conjectured that communication must be expressed through rationality. He articulates:

Rationality is understood to be a disposition of speaking and acting subjects that is expressed in modes of behavior for which there are good reasons or grounds, this means that rational expressions admit of objective evaluation.

(1989: 15)

The third point in undistorted communication, making oneself understandable, is underscored with the fact that the speaker must want to speak truthfully, thus establishing trust with the receiver of the message. Only when the three criteria of communication are met can the fourth rule be enacted, that the speaker and the receiver must come to a joint understanding of the message being communicated.

The theories of Habermas are linked to those of Arendt. Through Arendt's theory of plurality, that the three functions of labor, work, and action comprise the political life, one learns of the importance of speech and action. Moving away from theories of Greek philosophy in which thought was greater than action, Arendt articulates that the *vita activa* is in fact elevated beyond the *vita contemplativa*. Only through the public realm can one engage in the political life, the main purpose of labor and work and the only legacy man leaves behind after his life has come to an end. Participation in the political realm through speech and action are at the apex of one's purpose in society. Through a social contract, citizens are able to engage in public debate, fostering the ideas brought about through collaboration and enhanced by each one's uniqueness and contribution of individual ideas.

Arendt's theory lends itself to the importance of Habermas' writings on responsible communication. Speech is at the center of action, yet without clear speech, any utterances made are useless. Habermas delineates the proper standards of communication through his validity claims, which lend themselves to enabling effective action to take place in a social context.

Social Networking

The previous section presents the views of modern day theorists as influenced by their epistemological roots. Arendt's *The Human Condition* explains how action is a vital part of the *vita activa*, and only through speech and action can change take place. Habermas' writings provide insight into the public sphere and the role and function of communication in society. Miller (1997) contrasts James and Arendt by comparing their views of plurality and action by saying that for both philosophers, "individuals develop their potentialities through self-sacrifice for the common good. Action...is a way to combine the development and expression of the highest human capacities with the welfare of the community" (1997: 14). Although both James and Arendt agree on the fundamental importance of action, the latter took the approach of invoking an Aristotelian view of the polis, but similar to James, felt that personalities could be developed when working in concert for the common good.

Both Arendt and James oppose big government and large institutions which, in their respective views, could control the outcome of policy and ultimately affect the lives of citizens. Rather, both theorize that citizens should be the motivating force behind policy changes and the approach to which the government makes decisions. The way in which to achieve this end would be through citizens' action and participation. Other philosophers who espouse this view of limited government and small corporations include Alexis de Tocqueville in his writings on the American republic and Max Weber in *Politics as a Vocation* (1921).

Habermas' public sphere theory furthers the theoretical foundation of social change via communication and public participation as the catalyst for such change, and as

noted in the introduction, is the purpose of this thesis. Influenced by Enlightenment-era philosophers, such as Hobbes, in addition to early pragmatists such as James, one of Habermas' main theses is that of undistorted communication (1976). Habermas' contribution to the theoretical foundation of this thesis is two-fold. His validity claims emphasize the need for government accountability through a policy of honesty and transparency in communication. Secondly, agents of social change can learn through Habermas the necessary standards of communication that must be implemented in order for communicative action to be realized.

Today's public sphere is largely collaborated on the Internet through computer mediated networks (CMN) and social network sites (SNS). Known as new media, they provide the platform through which, in accordance with Habermas' validity claims, government can be critiqued and its power questioned and limited. The following section on social networking begins with a discussion on the definition of social networking sites, a review of the history behind the development of computer mediated networks, and provides insight and examples of uses for social change via communicative action on these sites as a tool for communicating with the government with the underlying intention to bring about social change.

In the digital age in which society finds itself, community participation and the democratic ideal espoused by early philosophers and modern day scholars is possible at unprecedented levels due to current technological innovations. The Internet provides a platform for Social Network (or Networking, to be further discussed) Sites (SNS), which in turn imparts a tool through which societal change and innovation can occur through record speed and near-universal access. A wave of new scholarship since the turn of the

century has furthered the literature in facilitating the extent to which researchers can understand SNS and its potential for change and advancement.

In communicating with the government, SNS is similar to e-government in that it allows for nonlinear and nonhierarchical communication that is accessible at all times (West, 2004). Such instant availability in communication has been found to increase confidence in government efficiency (Gore, 1993). Furthermore, the qualities of e-government are similar to SNS in that it encourages discourse and collaboration among citizens (Thompson, 1999). E-government has been hailed as a successful endeavor in redistributing power back to and among citizens (Fountain, 1999), and the same principles can be applied to using SNS to facilitate exchange between citizens and government.

The Internet is unique in that it breaks down traditional barriers of communication—distance, time, cost and censorship—and allows individual acts of participation to be conducive to collective action. Publishing or following a blog, posting on a forum, or joining a SNS for a cause are all considered to be collective action due to the potential of the ability to reach a broad and demographically diverse audience (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002). Social media is also helpful in putting change in the hands of the users through facilitating pluralism.

De fait, le pluralism n'est plus l'apanage des seuls éditeurs et des journalistes main appartient également aux utilisateurs/créateurs. Par leur comportement pro-actif, devenu une véritable force collective, ceux-ci deviennent partie prenante dans la création de valeur de la plateforme Internet elle-même.

(Deslandes, Fonnet & Godbert, 2009: 45)

Sey and Castells (2004) found that the political uses of the Internet have increased with the technological advancement of high-speed broadband, and that greater political uses of

the World Wide Web enhance the pervasiveness of social networking. Social media is said to provide opportunities to “directly reach out to and engage existing and prospective members and supporters with new opportunities for sharing, collaborating, and mobilizing collective action” (Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009: 65). The use of new media technologies like SNS directly impact and create “novel forms of collective action, enabling the creation of collaborative groups” (Shirky, 2008: 47) at unprecedented levels. The definition of an SNS is varied across the literature, but the main purpose of such a tool is to form a community in which people can communicate by utilizing user-generated content. The following section provides a brief history of the rise of social networking in the United States beginning in 1997 with the launch of www.SixDegrees.com and will describe the definitions of SNS, their purported purposes, and describe the degree to which they hold influence in today’s convergent world in relation to politics and citizen action.

A Brief History of Social Networking Sites

SixDegrees.com, launched in 1997, is said to be the first SNS that combined a personalized profile with a friends’ list and list surfing ability (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Prior to this site, users were able to connect with others via AIM (AOL Instant Messenger) or ICQ (Internet Chat Query), and although each had a friends’ (or buddy) list, other users could not see others’ friends. Although such a feature was not conducive to social networking, and therefore, could not be considered as true SNS, SixDegrees.com enabled users to send messages to each other and connect privately. Despite the innovation that SixDegrees.com brought to the newly discovered Internet

community, the site went out of business in 2000, just three years after its inception. Users complained that there was nothing left to do on the site after friends were found and accepted, and meeting strangers, a concept that the following section will prove evident, did not appeal to most users (boyd & Ellison, 2008).

At the turn of the century, a variety of new SNS launched. Among them were LiveJournal, an online diary that users could make public or private and friend other users. Ryze.com, launched in 2001, sought to create a portal for business owners and entrepreneurs to develop connections, but failed to achieve the requisite popularity needed to compete in the emerging market of SNS. LinkedIn, which launched in 2003, began as a forum through which professionals among 170 industries could “exchange information, ideas and opportunities” (www.Linkedin.com) and hosts 53 million users in 200 countries to this day. Friendster made its appearance as an SNS in 2001, but due to ill-equipped servers, numerous unfavorable restrictions on users and lack of confidence between users and the site, the SNS lost its population base in the United States. (boyd, 2006).

Initially available to select Boston-area universities in 2003, Facebook has expanded to more than 350 million active users, 65 million of which access the site through mobile devices (www.facebook.com), and is said to be, along with MySpace, among the most popular SNS in the United States. SNS and other user-generated content sites bear historical significance in the fact that such collaborative platforms are changing the dichotomy between citizens, the media, and politics (Bruns, 2005, 2008). For example, during the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama’s official campaign page gathered more than 1.2 million supporters (Langlois, Elmer, McKelvey & Devereaux,

2009). Such levels of participation have been unprecedented and present scholars with unique research questions and opportunities for social investigation, such as cultural and demographic-specific means of communication and methods of communication via online platforms (Elmer, 2006).

Definitions and Characteristics of SNS

While SNS is considered to be an integral component to everyday life (Keen, 2007), it has received little analytical consideration (Beer, 2008). boyd (2004) was among the first scholars to define SNS and wrote that their purpose was to allow users a method through which they could validate their identities to a community. Donath and boyd (2004) describe SNS as public displays of connection that furthered individuals' potentials for creating identity signals. boyd and Ellison (2008) suggest a three-fold purpose for SNS. Firstly, they are web-based services that exist for users to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, provide a list for which the user can see and interact with other users, and finally, navigate through their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The two scholars also differentiate between a social *networking* site and a social network site in that the former implies establishing new relationships between strangers whereas the latter allows individuals to make connections between already established networks of people.

They go on to further suggest that the term *social networking sites* is implicit of connections that have not been previously established, and as will be discussed, most online connections or friendships are in place to enhance latent ties that are made offline. The authors, in an article that has grown within the literature to be a source of definition

for the SNS phenomenon, prefer to use the terminology *social network sites* since it implies that the friendships that are defined online are established in a public forum to emphasize and give salience to those ties. In contrast, Beer (2008) suggests that instead of social networking sites, a broader term, such as Web 2.0 be used and as a subset, social networking, social networks, wikis, and the like be utilized within it.⁵ He writes that social networks encompass too broad of a definition given that most Web 2.0 platforms have some sort of social interaction among members, but the key differentiation lies in the extent to which members can interact. Therefore, he suggests that these features be organized in a manner that is exclusive to their typology.

While social networking may originally have been in place to bring people together from distant geographic locations, it has become increasingly localized (Postill, 2008). Most users associate with people from their own geographic regions with whom they share offline connections, whether socially or through the work place, despite the potential for access to international contacts and networks.⁶ The result of online social networking between individuals is said to be the result of “latent ties” that the two parties share in an offline context (Haythornthwaite, 2002). Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007), for example, found that friendships on Facebook were in place to solidify pre-existing relationships rather than to make new ones solely from an online environment. The literature has supported that users’ interest in making contact and establishing relationships with other individuals outside of one’s regular offline social network or geographic location are minimal (Mesch & Talmud, 2007). As Pahl (2002) articulated,

⁵ Web 2.0 is a user-enhanced, collaborative and participatory version of the World Wide Web. See Beer & Burrows (2007) and O’Reilly (2005).

⁶ This is true especially for teenagers. See Gross (2004).

researchers face a challenge when learning about social interactions due to the loosely constructed and varied definitions of a *friend*.

As previously mentioned, Beer (2008) warns that SNS must be differentiated between sites that exist for networking and making friends (Facebook, MySpace, etc.) and sites that serve a purpose beyond networking, such as YouTube or Flickr, which exist for sharing videos and pictures, respectively. While a variety of SNS can be found online, their main differences rest in the extent to which users make themselves visible to one another and allow interaction across various platforms. Facebook, for example, allows users to join a specific network or networks and have the option to make themselves visible to all members of the network or just selected ones, labeled as *friends* or *fans*.⁷ MySpace is similar in that users can join a network, monitor their privacy settings, and accumulate friends.

Mass Self-Communication

Manuel Castells is a prominent scholar whose works have contributed significantly to the body of literature on the potential for social change via CMN. He asserts that the media have morphed into the social space where power is decided, and as a result, identifies the subsequent rise of socialized communication as *mass self-communication*, describing it as “self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many” (2007: 248). Through mass self-communication, individuals have an opportunity to initiate social movements because of the Internet’s

⁷ The White House’s Facebook page, however, allows anyone, regardless of whether or not they are signed up on Facebook to peruse the page. The only exception is that the viewer must join the SNS in order to comment.

ability to act as a political platform for debate, reach a wide audience, and provide a means for leaving impressions on the minds of users. Furthermore, when a change agent has a goal to reach, the more he or she uses the Internet. Increased usage means that the individual will become autonomous (Castells, 2004), furthering the impact of mass self-communication.

Castells, Qui, Fernandez-Ardevol and Sey (2006) describe the social structure as a result of the interplay between the new technological paradigm and social organization at large. The technological and societal interplay have a unique impact on social movements in that although acting autonomously, users are in fact functioning in a plural manner in that their combined individual efforts are working in synch to bring about a desired outcome. SNS and other CMN further the opportunity for social agents to reach a consensus on a desired outcome due to the possibility of instant feedback and deliberation among all parties involved.

350 million users have accounts on Facebook, and the website is translated to more than 70 languages. Despite the fact that SNS hold great potential for social capital and enrichment to networks both online and offline, their launch into society has been met with criticism from the academy (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002). Early theorists asserted that the Internet's computer mediated networks harbored an individualistic environment thereby reducing social cues and undermining the social influence that groups can have on individuals (Hiltz & Turoff, 1978; Jessup, Connolly & Tansik, 1990; Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, 1984). If such claims were accurate, the Internet would not be a viable tool for promoting social change since individuals would not be influenced by one another. As CMN developed over the years and the obvious influence and sheer

number of SNS grew, however, the literature found that individuals can in fact be influenced by others regardless of their physical proximity (Postmes, Spears, Sakhel & de Groot, 2001; Spears, Lea & Lee, 1990). Therefore:

both strategic and cognitive processes may potentially transform the Internet from a tool for individualistic identity play to an empowering platform for the formation and definition of social identity and the preparation and perpetration of collective action. If the Web increases the salience of the social dimension and provides the strategic conditions that empower the expression of social identity, it will mobilize people and stimulate collective action.

(Brunsting & Postmes, 2002: 529)

Recent findings by the Pew Research Center suggest that trust in government, businesses, and media is at an all time historical low-point and is on a steady decline (Pew Research Center..., 2009). As a result, government and organizations are receiving public pressure to “shift their communicative culture from a model of selective dissemination to one of open conversation” (Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009: 66). Furthermore, it is imperative that to keep an open and transparent discourse with citizens, governments should place civic “*engagement, participation and dialogue* at the centre of all publicly-oriented organizational activities” (Ibid, *emphasis in original*). The use of SNS, especially for governmental and citizen action purposes, is a topic of great interest and debate in the media conversation. Scholarship has explored a variety of uses for SNS, but of course, has not provided with the literature with an all-encompassing guide to understanding the phenomenon.

The academy has failed to extensively explore users’ motivating factors behind participating in SNS (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002), however, participation in collective

action has been identified as a consequence of a thought process that considers costs and benefits, partly in the form of goal motives (Klandermans, 1984). While Klandermans additionally identifies social and reward motives in reasons for participating in social networking, goal motives are the most relevant to collective action in that they prompt the user to consider why they are joining a network, make assumptions and hold expectations about the amount of other participators within the group, and consider what goals they hope to achieve as a result of membership. If a goal is reached and agreed upon, social action possesses a greater chance of prompting social change. Furthermore, user generated content on SNS “constitute an outlet for citizens to express themselves, potentially creating greater social cohesion and identification” (OECD, 2007: 99).

Examples of Uses of Social Networks for Change

Social change via online networks has been greatly discussed in the media since the 2008 presidential election in the United States, although political uses of social networking gained explosive popularity in the 2006 Congressional election when Nancy Pelosi used SNS as a main tool for her campaign (Castells, 2007). The media attention afforded to social networking is evidenced by recent statistics published by the Pew Center for Internet Research (2009). During a short span of just four years, 79 percent of American adults ages 18 and older logged on to the Internet in 2009, an increase from 67 percent from 2005. 46 percent of American adults used SNS in 2009, and increase from eight percent in 2005. Mainstream media have also employed SNS during their newscasts. Viewers can send “tweets” or messages via Twitter to networks such as CNN or Fox News, for example, and anchors will read responses to questions posed on the air or

answer user-generated questions. Major networks also have created fan pages and groups on Facebook for viewers to follow and leave commentary on current events. The Obama campaign maximized the opportunities that SNS presented by, as previously noted, generating more than 1.2 million supporters in the official page.⁸

Networked media environments are replacing traditional media in the promotion of democracy (Clark & Aufderheide, 2009). The potential for SNS to enable collective action as a catalyst for social change does not just occur at the federal level. Since the conception of various sites, local organizations and communities have been able to facilitate desired outcomes and change within their localities by banding together through CMN. NGOs are increasingly using SNS to raise support for civic action and monetary contribution (Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009). The simplicity and ease of SNS is a primary reason for its success (Shepherd, 2009), as was the case for parents of a Florida public school district whose heavy reliance on and use of Facebook drastically altered the course of students' education.

In the fall of 2009, the Palm Beach County School of Florida sought to impose new regulations on teachers and school districts, including the controversial "embedded assessments" as part of the core curriculum. The computer-based assessments required that public schools administer subject tests every three weeks, and the examinations were created by the school board and were created to determine students' progress or lack thereof. For two months, parents and educators alike protested the proposed requirements, but to no avail, until a mother from the school district, Lisa Goldman, started a fan page on Facebook "Testing is not Teaching!—PBC citizens united to make a

⁸ This figure does not account for fan pages, fan groups, or any other platforms that lend unofficial support to the Obama campaign.

difference!”. Parents flooded school board meetings wearing bright orange shirts to stand out in the crowd and used the fan page on Facebook as their platform for discussing ideas, reaching a consensus on the desired goal, organizing protests, and carrying out their actions. The page reached 8,000 fans in mid-November, 2009, nearly one month after the school board made the decision to withdraw the requirements for the testing and distribute power to the schools to determine the frequency and content of the exams (Bushouse, 2009). This is a classic example of the power that ordinary citizens can have on their community when engaging in community action by means of social networking. The potential is nearly limitless when looked at on a national level, which by nature, entails an increased amount of citizens.

SNS have been utilized on a national level even in countries that do not enjoy the democratic freedoms and ideals espoused by the West. For example, Iranian citizens used Twitter in the presidential election of June 2009 to expose alleged fraudulent voting activity by incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Supporters of Mir-Hossein Mousavi protested and demonstrated in Tehran. Even when the government in essence shut down the Internet and banned the press from reporting on the mass protests, citizens, namely the youth, recorded footage on their cell phones, posted it on Twitter, and essentially broadcast the information to the world, exposing the horrific and violent events taking place (Iran protesters using tech to skirt curbs, 2009).

In yet another monumental example of SNS contributing to social advancement, the Red Cross facilitated a donation campaign through the various social media in which they participate after the catastrophic earthquake devastating Haiti in January 2010. At the time of writing this thesis, the death toll was speculatively in the tens of thousands.

Haitians surviving the earthquake posted brief messages on Twitter to not only communicate with loved ones concerning their whereabouts, but showed the rest of the world the tragic aftermath and desperate conditions that prompted a world-wide relief effort that continues now months after the earthquake.

Potential and Barriers of SNS

The literature has investigated just a small amount of the contributions that CMN have provided the populace in terms of collective action, yet neither society nor the academy have fully explored the potential that computer mediated networks possess. With the technological enhancement of cell phones, PDA's (personal desktop assistants) and smartphones, or phones such as the BlackBerry or iPhone that are designed with social connectivity and Internet access as their core purpose, the potential for collective action via these enhanced communication methods is essentially infinite. Between the years of 2002 and 2008, subscriptions to mobile phones have grown to more than 4 billion worldwide (Acharya, 2008). 65 million Facebook users alone access the site through their mobile phones. Clearly, there is a market and therefore, potential for social action through mobile connectivity.

Several studies have examined the relationship among mobile devices, social and group identity, and participation. Bell described mobile networks as “constellations of social and cultural practice” (2006: 54). Castells, Fernández- Ardèvol, Qui and Sey (2006) examined various geographic contributions to mobile technology connectivity across cultural, political, economic, and social conditions. Rheingold wrote of the potential that mobile technologies possess when he stated that:

These devices will help people coordinate actions with others around the world- and, perhaps more importantly, with people nearby. Groups of people using these tools will gain new forms of social power, new ways to organize their interactions and exchanges...”

(2002: xii)

As technology advances, so does the potential for increased social action and change.

The World Wide Web, despite its potential for goal-oriented and effective social organization, presents unique challenges in promoting democracy. Although increased user participation allows for the “democratization of media production” (Jenkins, 2006: 64), barriers still exist. Unequal access precipitated by limited or nonexistent computer skills can be detrimental to certain demographics of citizens from participating in the online conversation of social change (Barney, 2008). Furthermore, one is not required to be considered an expert to participate in producing content on SNS, making the line between expert and amateur vague, if not dangerous. Worthwhile opinions and social movements can get lost in the vast amount of content on the Web. The fact that just about anyone with access to a computer and the Internet can post any opinion they deem credible presents a need for gatekeepers to differentiate between amateurs and experts. (Keen, 2007).

Ethical concerns also exist with users posting content. Participation on SNS is considered by some scholars to be free labor in that the user joins a network, posts content, and encourages others to join. Websites profit from advertising revenue when more people join, therefore, users are in effect working for free (Shepherd, 2009). Stakeholders and interest groups can push for an agenda of deregulation, which at the surface, portrays a positive aspect because it grants greater freedoms to the online

community, but in actuality, neither furthers nor guarantees the right to communicate (Silverstone, 2004).

Despite the Internet's inherent nature for pervasiveness and ease of access, it is not a cure-all for solutions to promoting democracy or social change. In what Mosco (2004) terms as the "End of Geography" myth, the Internet is not "the logical extension of a process of freeing people from spatial constraint with all its confining economic and social implications" (Ibid: 91). In other words, just because the Internet has the ability to bring people together, does not mean that it effectively reaches that aim. Several works examine the importance of place in social change and labeled proximity a crucial factor for social change to take place (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 1997; Ford & Gil, 2001). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's 2007 report *Participative Web and User-Generated Content: Web 2.0 Wikis, and Social Networking* considers the "digital divide" as a detrimental factor to attaining world-wide communication.

Rooted in epistemological roots of Hobbes' social contract theory, James' theory on plurality, and guided by the theories of Arendt, Habermas, and other contemporary scholars, the literature demonstrates theoretically how ordinary citizens can prompt social change through the democratic process of singular involvement for a pluralistic cause via new media. Social contract theory stipulates that the government is responsible for the protection of the rights of man. Social change is prompted through individual citizens coming together for a plural cause, one that supersedes their individual needs and is for the betterment of the entire community. The thesis maintains that the betterment of the community at large—or social change—is possible through direct action, or democracy.

Since it is the responsibility of the government to ensure society's access to the pursuit of well-being and prosperity, citizens should be able to rally the government and bring upon the change that is demanded.

Drawing on James' claim that society comes together during times of crisis, the thesis is guided by the claim that current day society finds itself at an opportune time to bring about the change that is wanted, if not needed. Dewey and Arendt state that communication and political participation is the duty of citizens, an obligation that extends beyond the act of voting. Castells provides insight into individual mass communication that in union with combined effort, can achieve a desired goal. Using Habermas' outline of the responsibilities of a communicator, the thesis claims that during today's economic and societal crisis in the United States, citizens are obligated to step forward and contribute via participation in volunteering in their local communities and actively vocalizing their opinions to the government, whose responsibility is to protect and serve the population based on the social contract. Furthermore, the government and media outlets, primarily new media, are obliged to provide a clear forum through which communication is fostered and openly encouraged. This is especially important since the media provide a forum through which social action is decided (Rivers and Schramm, 1969), even more so during times of crisis, such as war, since the consequences are the greatest and the most is at stake (Eid, 2008).

The literature supports the notion of change through volunteerism and democratic participation, and that civil society can be maintained when the members of that society are concerned for the good of the community at large (Keane, 1988; Klien, 1999; Miller, 1997; Sullivan, 1986; Taylor, 1990). Klien supports the belief of public debate in

facilitating change when he states, “If public argument has the potential to influence the formation of public communities and norms for appropriate belief and action, then the capacity to ethically evaluate public argument may help facilitate a free, just and democratic public community” (1999: 341).

Responsibilities of the Media

The method through which public argument and debate can be carried out and change be facilitated is by the use of social media and traditional media awareness. The media are said to be the Fourth Estate of government. The history of journalism and its function span a multitude of functions. The purpose of publishing emanated from a narrow focus, serving the interest of political parties, to spanning a broad scope, existing in the interest of informing the public in a fair and nonbiased manner. Given journalism’s 400 year history, it is only relatively recently, in the 1920s, that publications sought to implement codes of ethics and practice for journalists to maintain impartiality and balance (Ward, 2005).

In order for social change to occur, it is imperative that the media uphold the self-imposed standards of integrity to which audiences over time have grown accustomed and demand. Whereas newspapers of the 19th Century, for example, were owned and produced by political parties, and readers expected to encounter coverage that portrayed politicians in an unbalanced fashion (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Pasley, 2001; Schudson, 1978), it is no longer practiced. A notable turning point for the standards of journalism could be attributed to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s second run for the presidency in 1937, when his campaign manager made accusations of media bias

(Farley, 1938). In more recent times, the U.S. media have been criticized as being imbalanced and partial during the 2003 War on Iraq, and caused critics to dub it the “war of media” (Eid, 2008: 105).

Besides the fact that audiences expect media sources to uphold the standards of journalism, doing so is important because as new media bring the world together, unbalanced reporting can “wreak havoc on a tightly linked global world” (Ward, 2005: 5). Bias and media slant can be difficult to identify since they are often subtle in presentation. Page and Shapiro (1992) identify several types of biases, including procapitalist, anticommunist, minimal government, and nationalistic biases. Biases for liberal, conservative, and neutral political stances also exist in the media (Niven, 2002). In their meta-analysis of news content, D’Alessio and Allen (2000) find that it is allegations of partisan bias that have attracted the most attention.

Media accountability and standards of journalism are not universally defined, and the industry lacks a clear, concise definition of ethical standards (Plaisance, 2000; Pritchard, 2000). However, the literature suggests that media ethics are relative to the cultural and societal functions of the public that it serves (Limor & Himelboim, 2006). Much like the social contract that Hobbes proposes between a sovereign and his people, so should a social contract exist among the citizens, the media, and the government. Carey suggests that journalism should be a “democratic process” (2000: 22). In their study of 242 media codes of ethics in 94 countries, Limor and Himelboim found that there does not exist one consistent code of ethics, arguing that “codes of ethics reflect the political and economic characteristics of the society in which they operate” (2006: 270). New media, as the title implies, function as a media outlet in which information is

gathered and distributed. Because of this, it is their duty as news sources to facilitate open communication among users, thereby enabling them to gather online and reach a consensus on desired goals, and also carry out and implement those goals.

The foundations of the United States rest on freedom of speech and democratic interaction between the people and government. The OECD report articulates the greater significance of Internet social movements beyond the fact that it contributed to greater citizen participation, but rather, implies a “shift away from simple passive consumption of...mass distribution media models...to more active choosing, interacting and creating content...and a shift to participatory ‘culture’” (2007: 64). Through use of social media and grassroots efforts, citizens can engage in shaping the future of the nation. It is the position of this thesis that a way through which society can change is through civic contribution, both in democratic participation, i.e. providing feedback to elected officials and voting, and through direct contribution to one’s immediate community. Social change cannot occur unless the government and media act ethically. Because society becomes a cohesive entity during times of crisis—much like present day’s wars and financial situation—action and change are possible through creating a present and active voice for government to hear. The response to change and its success rests in the strength in the number of the masses.

The literature review presents a paradigm through which the function of two-way communication between government and the people for social change can occur. From *Leviathan*, we learn of the responsibility government has to citizens in protecting them against the injustices that exist outside of a social contract. *The Moral Equivalent of War* speaks of man’s passionate desire for war that can be sparked and furthered by the media’

s influence, but on a more important level, we learn of the power that citizens have to sway their government in the method of action during crisis. The two epistemological works provide a solid background to understanding *The Human Condition* and the necessary components needed—speech and action—in order to effectively bring about social change. The writings of Habermas show a model of fair and ethical communication that, if not in place, social change has a limited chance of occurring since the message being disseminated will lose its relevance if not portrayed under certain necessary standards.

By investigating the theories of government responsibility, collective action, the right to communicate, public sphere theory, communication validity claims, and mass-self communication, a unique synthesis of theories and ideas contribute to the interplay between social change and communication. The selected authors, though emerging from differing schools of thought, contribute specific threads of knowledge that when used in conjunction with one another, present a unique framework for analysis of the new and prevailing field of social media communication. Scholarship in the last decade has brought insight into new social media and the best methods for rallying citizens together in order to bring about agreed-upon goals, and have the voices of the masses not only heard but obeyed. From this emerges a deeper understanding of the tools and resources that SNS and the Internet overall can provide to accomplish these goals. The following chapter, methodology, presents a detailed description of the conceptualization of issues as applied to the purpose of the thesis. Research questions are identified and the method through which they are answered is examined.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of the thesis is to explore how Americans in the online forum conceptualize the issues of crisis and decipher ways that citizens can effectively communicate with government with the end goal of bringing about social change. Drawing on Hobbes' view of a social contract with government, the thesis takes the position of ethical government accountability to citizens vis-à-vis transparency, which is accomplished through maintaining open lines of communication. James' theory on war as a tool for mobilization of society provides the basis from which to assume that society can change both itself and government. Further drawing on Arendt's theory of pluralism for action, the thesis takes the position that citizens can act in unison for social change, and the method through which they can effectively do so is through social network sites (SNS). Acting as a platform, SNS allow not only immediate communication and feedback to government, but also promote collaboration among the public. Since the public engages in debate during critical times when the most is stake for the nation as a whole, the use of SNS is widely esteemed as an efficient and pervasive method through which a consensus can be reached and a goal initiated and achieved.

As previously noted in the literature review, social change is not a new concept, but rather, has experienced a rebirth and significant media attention since Barack Obama's campaign for the Democratic Party's nomination and his subsequent presidential campaign. The Obama campaign heavily relied on Facebook and other social

media in addition to the official campaign site's blog. Doing so allowed for not only increased publicity, but also for direct communication among potential voters, promised voters, and non-supporters alike. During his campaigns, both for the Democratic nomination and presidency, Obama has promoted social change through slogans such as "Yes We Can" and others meant to motivate the populace to not only vote for him, but also to be effective activists within their communities. Americans, finding their country in a near collapse given the financial and health care crises, in addition to the War in Afghanistan, recognize that change is needed. In order to effectively convey the desire for change and the specific changes that must take place, engagement in SNS provides a new method of communication. Beyond the statistics previously presented on the pervasiveness of SNS, communication through computer-mediated networks (CMN) prescribes to Habermas' communication validity claims. This specific thread of knowledge allows specific methodological procedures to be employed in order to answer the research questions.

The research selectively analyzes correspondence and dialogue on two SNS sites, Facebook and YouTube. It focuses on the two-way communication that SNS enables between government and citizens. This allows citizens to benefit from greater levels of accountability and promotes government transparency, which is conducive to not only collaborative approaches among citizens, but also allows for the government to be examined through new media. In order to understand the unique language that the online forum presents, the next section defines concepts that are identified in the literature and applied theoretically to the purposes of this thesis, as well as terms that are unique to the online world.

Concepts and Terms

Drawn from the theoretical foundations of the literature, the following concepts are identified and implemented in order to effectively understand the terminology that is used in the presentation of data analysis and findings. As is characteristic of qualitative research, more concepts are drawn upon during the course of study of SNS, as new discoveries are made about the findings during the coding process. The concepts found below are essential to the thesis because they provide the parameters for investigating the research questions—Social Network Sites, Social Change, and Crisis.

Social Network Site: The main purpose of SNS is to create of forum for communication in which traditional barriers of deliberation and information sharing do not impose limitations. While the importance of geographic location has been identified as an important aspect to collective action, for the purpose of widespread and national social change, an online forum is a viable tool for banding the citizens of a country together in what would otherwise be an impossible endeavor. It is important to note the difference between social network and social networking. boyd and Ellison (2008) differentiate that the former is a more appropriate term to use because it denotes the reestablishment of latent ties in the online community, rather than the latter, which suggests that users seek to meet new people. Accordingly, a social network site is a component of a computer-mediated network that allows people to gather and discuss ideas, friend each other, and participate in an open forum on a website, and the term is used within the thesis with the above definition in mind. The SNS is a tool through which social change can occur. It is not an ends to a mean, but rather is a means to the end of

accomplishing a specific, set upon goal. The goal is specified when people on an SNS form a consensus about what needs to change. Once that is decided, the users can reach an agreement on how exactly the change is to occur.

Social Change: Social change, for the purpose of the thesis, is a goal that the politically active in the online forum use to refer to the necessary changes that they feel must take place in the country. Social change is whatever the users, both individually and collectively, decide. Since it holds a different meaning to each individual, a single definition of social change is unattainable and beyond the scope of the thesis. Rather, the notion of social change can be understood for the purpose of the thesis as societal improvement on a national level. In the United States, a form of social change is health care. American citizens and politicians alike describe the current state of healthcare as a crisis, much in the same manner they discuss the financial collapse or the War in Afghanistan. Changing an aspect of the current state of conditions, whichever crisis they decide to join or rally for, is considered social change because it involves the masses and affects everyone, albeit directly or indirectly. For example, healthcare reform may only affect the less fortunate populations in America, but the wealthy who can afford insurance coverage will not be affected by the legislation since they are already covered. They will, however, be affected indirectly by health care reform because they may face higher taxes.

Another example is the War in Afghanistan. President Obama was awarded with a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts on trying to attain peace, but some Americans, even within his party, are dissatisfied with his progress and are against the war. Some support the notion of sending more troops, while others would prefer an immediate withdraw. At

the end of 2009, this topic was covered greatly in the news and Obama decided to send nearly 40,000 additional American troops. This could be viewed as a social change because it affects the status of America in the war, and although battles do not take place in the traditional sense on U.S. soil, activists may perceive this act of sending more troops as increasing our protection against terrorists.

The definition of social change can also be leant to the change of attitudes, disciplines, or beliefs overall in a specified group. An increase in volunteering in the United States and participation in the community, performed with the goal of making society better in mind, is an example of social change. Although volunteering, for example, to paint a local high school gymnasium for free, only helps those who attend that school, it creates a sense of advocacy and change for that population. The literature, specifically Arendt and James, promote civic involvement for the betterment of society, and that is considered to be social change.

Crisis: Crises are identified as events or situations that disrupt the public's sense of safety, security, or overall quality of life. They are major situations, such as wars, political conflicts, or situations of abject danger, that threaten or have already begun to erode the core of a nation. They cannot be rectified immediately, but rather, require large acts, such as legislation or change of attitude, in order to reverse the damaging effects that either are about to occur or threaten. The collapse of banks in the United States in the fall of 2008 is an example of a crisis because, although it was not as severe as the Great Depression, the U.S. economy was unstable and led to the foreclosure of many houses, and had greater consequences in that it caused a global financial crisis.

In addition to the above concepts, certain terms are unique to the online communities in which they are found. SNS have a set of vocabulary that when used within their own context, take on a different meaning. The following terms are described here in order to understand what these seemingly simple words mean in the online community: Friend, Network, Wall, Fan Page, Group, and Status.

Friend: For the purpose of the thesis, a *friend* is someone with whom another user establishes an online connection and maintains on a visible list (friends list, buddy list, etc.) for other users to see. The agreement to be friends on a SNS is initiated through one user sending an invitation, also called a friend request, to another user who then accepts. Once the acceptance has been sent, both parties are able to see each other's profile, engage in both public and private messages, and depending on the security setting of each user, see pictures and read other public conversations in which the user has engaged. An online "friendship" can exist between two users who may or may not know each other offline, or who share latent ties through acquaintances, the work place, or an educational institution.

Network: A network is the main association through which a user holds on his or her SNS account. Depending on the security setting, one may join a network and make their profile visible to all individuals on that network regardless of whether or not they are friends. For example, users whose main networks are educational institutions, such as the University of Ottawa, may see each others' profiles unless otherwise specified, whereas members who belong to the University of Miami network would be unable to read the profiles of those from University of Ottawa. Networks can be regional, city-wide, institutional, or workplace related. Due to the expansion of Facebook and an

interest in maintaining user privacy and security, national networks, such as “Canada” no longer exist.

Wall: A wall, commonly used on Facebook, functions as an open area for users’ friends to post public messages, videos, and pictures. The profile owner can also post on his or her own wall messages, videos, and pictures for others to comment on. A friend can comment on another friend’s wall post, and all users are notified when a comment has been generated either on their wall, or a post they made on someone else’s wall.

Fan Page: A fan page is primarily used for a company or public figure, such as Barack Obama or the White House. The page functions as a profile in that it allows the entity to gather friends, but instead they are referred to as fans. The fans can comment on pictures, postings, and status updates in the same way they can leave feedback to a friend.

Group: A group is similar to a profile, but does center around making friends. Rather, a group functions as point of interest that various users from different networks have in common. Groups can be created by any user with an account on the SNS and can be unofficial. “Vote for McCain” or “Anti- Hilary” are examples of user-generated groups. Groups can be private, by invitation only, or open for all users spanning any network to join.

Status: A status is a public update on what the user is thinking or doing. Although posted on the user’s wall, a status update cannot be in the form of pictures or video, but only in text form. A status update can be commented on by other users, and can only be seen by those who are on the user’s friend list. Fan pages can also have status updates urging fan to follow a direction, such as voting or watching a television program at a certain time. There is no limit to the amounts of status updates one can post each day. A

political status update on a politician's fan page may include, "Look at my picture page for the latest images from the rally on the Hill".

Research Questions

The thesis investigates ways in which the use of social networks can facilitate both government and media morality and accountability to the populations which they serve, thereby enabling ordinary citizens to participate in the democratic process and prompt social change during times of national crises. It also conceptualizes the issues that the American people deem important or crucial to current day affairs. The research questions are designed in accordance with the concepts identified herein. The purpose of the study is to explore the ways in which social change can occur during times of crisis using new media. Therefore, the main research questions of the thesis are:

- RQ1: What issues do Americans participating in the online forums identify as crises and how are these issues then conceptualized?
- RQ2: What are the publicly articulated goals deciphered as a response to conceptualization of issues and the government's use of social networking?
- RQ3: What is the government's response to these goals and the public's use of social networking?

The research questions tie in with the theoretical framework in that they seek to investigate ways in which new media promote social change. As discussed in the literature review, SNS provide a method through which society can come together to discuss ideas for change and implement their goals. SNS also exist in accordance with Habermas' guides for effective and valid communication in that they allow coherent

expression, give the receiver of the message (the government) something to understand, allow the speaker (Internet user) to make his or herself heard, and finally, allow both parties to meet an understanding. Furthered by the fact that SNS allow rapid speed and immediate feedback, government and citizen communication is occurring at unprecedented levels due to new technological platforms.

Research Design

The research is qualitative in nature, and accordingly, utilizes inductive reasoning, which is used not only in defining the problem, but also in interpreting the findings (Eid & Lagacé, 2007) and is useful for “generalizing from a given set of evidence to a larger set of events or circumstances” (McLeod & Tichenor, 2007: 10). Because inductive reasoning is “used continuously both in problem definition and the interpretation of results” (Ibid), it allows the researcher to conceptually generalize about the issue at hand, which in turn, may lead to other discoveries about the topic under investigation. Because of this, the research sits at the macroscopic conceptual level, which is used when the unit of analysis is a collective or larger social unit, such as a community or a social system (Ibid).

The research design uses qualitative content analysis. Hoslti (1968) describes content analysis as “any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages” (1968: 608). Berg defines it as “a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings” (2007a: 248). It is lauded as one of the most dominant methodologies in communication research. One study

found content analysis to be used in one-third of journal articles on political communication between the years of 1978 and 1979 (Jackson-Beeck & Kraus, 1980).

Content analysis is useful in inquiring about the “content of messages embedded within texts” (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000: 236). Although content analysis usually employs quantitative methods, in studies that seek to decipher meanings associated with content, a qualitative approach is preferred. Babbie writes that not all “content analysis results in counting. Sometimes a qualitative assessment of the materials is most appropriate” (2004: 340). In this thesis, since the goal is to identify abstract concepts and make a connection to decipher the higher meaning and implication of those concepts, a qualitative approach is the most suitable method.

Qualitative data is evaluated through an interpretation process and coding operation (Bodgan & Biklen, 2003; Maxfield & Babbie, 2006; Morse & Richards, 2002). Coding is helpful because it allows one to draw connections on themes and concepts imbedded within the data, and reaches and promotes “higher-level thinking” (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2007: 596). The thesis employs the three steps to coding as identified by Strauss (1987). During the first stage, open coding, themes and preliminary concepts are identified throughout the sample and recorded. This allows for the finding of abstract concepts within the text (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973).

The second step of the coding process, axial coding, allows for systematically organizing all of the codes that are identified during the first stage of open coding. As Miles and Huberman state, codes should “relate to one another in coherent, study-important ways; they should be part of a governing structure” (1994: 62). Axial coding allows for questioning of the integrity of preliminary codes and determines if there are

more efficient ways of coding. It allows the researcher to “ask about causes and consequences, conditions and interactions, strategies and processes, and look for categories or concepts that cluster together” (Frey, Boton & Kreps, 2007: 599).

The third and final stage of coding, selective coding, allows for the selection of data that maintain the conceptual coding categories previously developed. Selective coding also allows for the elaboration of major themes for the reorganization of concepts identified earlier in the initial process. It also enables final identification of the major themes throughout the sample that will be used in analysis.

Coding can occur at the level of a few words, lines, paragraphs, or entire texts. For the purpose of this thesis, the selected comments of the sample in their entirety are coded. In order to maintain the integrity of the comments generated, they are downloaded off of the SNS. McMillan writes of the importance of retrieving the text meant for analysis because it maintains the standardization of the text that otherwise is “always in process” (2000: 93). Koehler (1999) argues the same point, stating that downloading HTML texts “freezes” them in time. This is important because on SNS, users are free to delete their comments or add to them, and since a specific time frame is selected, it would compromise the integrity of the study if the comments are analyzed as they appear on the day they happen to be logged. Instead, all of the texts are downloaded on the same day and put into PDF format, that way they cannot be changed by the posting user during coding and analysis.

The research also relies on archival work. Archival work is essentially anything with a record, and is especially useful given its unobtrusive nature, which can provide insight to information that would otherwise be unavailable through any other means

(Berg, 2007b: 147). The use of archival work, such as gathering postings from Facebook or a blog, are beneficial for a variety of reasons, such as their relative ease of accessibility. The data can be categorized in a manner that is conducive to assisting the researcher in gathering the most pertinent information (Lofland, Snow, Anderson & Lofland, 2006: 150). Furthermore, archival work does not require informed consent since the information is a public record.

In conducting the research, the first step involved identifying recurrent themes throughout the sample. Following the model of axial coding, three main issues were identified—the economy, health care, and the War in Afghanistan. From those issues, sentiments and goals were deciphered. As a result, four publicly articulated sentiments and three main goals, in addition to four government responses were identified. The total number of topics analyzed is 14 from a sample of 2,000 comments, questions, and suggestions posted on the selected social media sites, which comprises approximately ten percent of the available population on the selected dates of analysis.

The timeframe of the study takes place one year after Obama's inauguration to office. Since a primary goal of the research is to determine the public consensus and search for thematic elements to the online dialogue of the political community, the sample is derived from the day before, on, and after the State of the Union Address, occurring January 27, 2010. This date was selected for a variety of reasons. Firstly, as already mentioned, Obama has been in office one year to this date, and a slew of policy changes and initiatives have already taken place. The State of the Union Address occurs annually and generates a high amount of discussion both in the media and among citizens.

Selecting the days around the address provides a rich context for textual analysis since a high volume of user-generated commentary takes place during this period. At this time last year, the nation was adjusting to a new president tasked with bringing the nation out of crisis, namely war and financial. The State of the Union Address is a concise summation of the progress that has been made thus far in addition to highlighting areas that need improvement and further investigation. Accordingly, it is only appropriate that the sample be drawn from such an imperative time frame, not only because of the one year mark of the president's inauguration, but also because the selected social networks experienced a record volume of user-commentary on these days. Citizens had a lot to say and SNS provided a forum through which users could voice their concerns and criticisms. The selected days, in effect, are a summation of the year's crisis situations and responses that citizens conveyed after Obama's first year in office. A qualitative research design is used to investigate recent government action regarding social change and subsequent responses to national crisis situations. The following sites provide a forum through which individuals can leave direct feedback to official government postings; www.youtube.com/user/whitehouse and www.facebook.com/whitehouse.

Although the Whitehouse is also on Twitter and has a blog, the comments the postings have received are not visible to the public, and therefore, cannot be analyzed for the purposes of this thesis. Although on MySpace, the White House has more than 170,000 friends, and 12,000 user-generated comments, the comments are not concentrated around the State of the Union Address and are substantially less in number than those found on Facebook or YouTube.

Data Collection and Sampling

As mentioned previously, the notion of social change has experienced a rebirth inspired by President Obama's campaign for social change during the presidential election. Because of the current context for social change, it is only appropriate that the data collection occurs surrounding the dates of the State of the Union Address. Units of analysis are the comments and questions left on the walls of the White House's Facebook page and a specific YouTube page that hosts a question and answer session with the president in which users submitted questions or comments to be directly answered by Obama. The findings are compiled and analyzed with the ultimate goal of describing the current issues with social networking and providing recommendations for ways in which governments and citizens alike can effectively communicate with each other through new media.

The White House's fan page on Facebook has nearly 417,000 fans. YouTube is no exception to the wide-reaching popularity of SNS with nearly 3 million views since January 2009 and continues to climb daily. The sheer number of the White House's fan base leads to hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of comments left by citizens. The selected days of analysis still have tens of thousands of comments that would be nearly impossible to code in a reasonable amount of time. Because of the near impossibility of analyzing every single comment, the thesis evaluates and answers the research questions through three methods of sampling—purposive, quota, and sequential. The dates selected include January 26, 2010, the day before the State of the Union Address, through January 28, 2010 the day after the address. These dates were chosen for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the address took place nearly one year to the date that President Obama was

sworn in to office. The address, which is delivered annually, is a report card on the nation's progress. Given that the U.S. is experiencing crises on a multitude of levels, namely in the areas of finance, health care, and war, Americans have many issues to raise and criticisms, whether negative or positive, to convey. Accordingly, record amounts of participation occurred given the short time frame in comparison to other three day periods throughout the president's first year. The State of the Union Address served as a forum for deliberation and accountability.

Sampling any other period prior to his first year in office may misrepresent the true sentiments of the nation since the majority of the first year of a new president's term is referred to as the "honeymoon phase" in popular media, which connotes that citizens are mesmerized by the newness of the administration and the potential it holds for change. This is especially true for Obama since he is the first African American chief executive officer. Furthermore, citizens showed escalating dissatisfaction with the Bush administration, evident in President Bush's steady decline of approval ratings⁹ and may have voted for the candidate farthest from any Republican ties. In a two party system, this automatically gives Obama an advantage simply because he is not affiliated with George W. Bush or John McCain, his running opponent.

As mentioned, three types of sampling are executed. Since the thesis relies on qualitative analysis, only non-probability sampling strategies have been adopted in this thesis, in selecting the sampling techniques. The first sampling technique is purposive sampling, which is employed in selecting "unique cases that are especially informative" (Neuman, 2007: 348). Since political usage of SNS is a new area of research, the sample

⁹ In a CBS News and *New York Times* Poll, President Bush's final approval rating was 22 percent, reportedly the lowest on record for an outgoing president. See (Thee-Brenan, 2009).

provides a unique opportunity to gain knowledge on how to think of social networking and networks. New themes and concepts are derived from commentary in the online community. Users provide insight as to what the general consensus is since these users represent a variety of opinions and hold issues to different levels of importance. Purposive sampling allows for the acquisition of “deeper understanding of types” (Ibid). Among the main purpose of the study is to gain insight to the conversation of the American people, a question that can be effectively answered through purposive sampling.

The next type of sampling employed is quota sampling, which seeks to identify categories of analysis, in this case themes, and answer research questions based on a fixed number of units per category. Although quota sampling may not be appropriate in all situations, it is useful and reliable in the thesis due to the nature of comments on the selected social media sites. In a forum or discussion thread, themes are recurrent and the discussion becomes repetitive after a certain point. This was found to be the case in the pilot study of the thesis. Quota sampling eliminates excessive commentary that does not further knowledge of findings and allows for concentration on a wide variety of issues.

To further the validity of the findings and benefit from the richness of conversation on the SNS, sequential sampling technique is also used. As mentioned, conversations after a certain point become repetitive. The users have refuted and debated one another’s points, and the topic on that particular thread has become exhausted. However, often times on long forums, conversations change and new debates emerge. For example, the conversation may begin as one concerning fixing the economy by providing stimulus money to create jobs. One user comments that she thinks it should be schools,

not the banks, that should receive funds. Another user proposes that teachers are not paid well enough. Finally, further down the conversation, someone begins a discussion on the lack of quality education and the high drop-out rate in schools, and blames it on teen pregnancy and lack of sexual education in the classroom. The conversation thread began as one that sought to address the economy, but now teen pregnancy is being discussed. Gathering commentary from this particular thread is sequential sampling, and is useful because it provides rich insight into the thoughts and opinions of Americans that may not have been expressed since the idea was not generated in its own thread or discussion forum. It grew out of commentary and deliberation with other users, which is one of the main functions of a social network site.

Three main topics are identified, and the first 200 comments from each are analyzed. This is because in the pilot study, it was found that, as explained, after a certain amount of comments, the nature of the topic has changed. When the change of conversation occurs, the next ten comments are selected for analysis to fulfill the objective of sequential sampling and capture a more rich and varied sample of sentiments and issues of conceptualization.

Through qualitative analysis, the research evaluates what type of criticism is being posted, whether it is positive or negative, the content of the messages being expressed, the problems encountered in the new administration and what measures are being taken to rectify social problems, and what change, if any, has come about since the new administration took office, as will be further discussed. Irrelevant comments are ignored and disqualified from being included in the analysis. This includes rants using

overly explicit language or comments that are meant to offend or intentionally disrespect others on grounds of race, gender, expressed opinions, or political affiliation.

In order to effectively ensure the validity of the study, consistent analysis of content is in place. Accuracy is upheld in that the authenticity of the pages being analyzed are always from official postings, and the examination of the content espouse the principles of objectivity, fairness, and balance analysis. In order to assess the standards of the research quality, the thesis follows a synthesis of instructions outlined by Glaser (1978), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Lincoln (1995).

Glaser (1978) writes of theoretical codes that are to be used during the coding process of qualitative content analysis in order to ensure accurate integration of data pieces. Among these codes include causes, contingencies, covariance, interaction of effects, interdependence, strategies, and techniques, among others, that assist in the second and third levels of coding. Furthermore, Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe four questions for assessing quality that researchers use to ensure accurate work. By questioning the truthfulness of the findings, criteria used in data judgment, applicability of findings to other populations, reasonability of study replication and similar results, in addition to acknowledging researcher biases, greater authenticity is assigned to the findings of the study.

Furthermore, Lincoln (1995) has added to these criteria, one standard which the thesis employs in ensuring quality. She specifies that voice, or the presence of diverse populations or participants, is in place. Since the research takes place on Facebook and YouTube, two social networks sites that are open to all ages, races, genders, sexual orientations, political views, etc., of the online world, a broad range of populations found

across the United States is represented. Also, because selection criteria have been strictly defined, the findings and measures are considered to be valid (Selltiz, Jahoda, Deutsch & Cook: 1967). A unique blend of three reputable qualitative content analysis sampling techniques—purposive, quota, and sampling—are employed, which furthers the authenticity of the findings. For these reasons, the thesis is both confirmable, in that research biases have been identified, and also credible, in that “different persons, times, places...” (Jackson, Gillis & Verberg, 2007: 457) have been used in conducting the research.

The following chapter discusses the findings and analysis of the study. The data are presented according to the themes and concepts as conceptualized by participants in the online social networks under investigation. It answers the research questions and links the findings of the study to the theoretical framework of the thesis.

Chapter 4

Findings and Analysis

The period of time during any president's first year of office is met with criticism and is flooded with expressions of both disapproval in the course of the nation and applaud for the progress and improvements made up to that point. The fact that the nation is embedded in a multitude of self-proclaimed crises from both the government and populace, the Obama Administration faces an increased amount of public commentary and criticism. Being that President Obama is the first black chief executive officer and that he was inaugurated into office at a time of a public outcry for change in both politics and policy—healthcare, financial reform, and war— Americans and the world at large watched the president's first year under a great amount of scrutiny. Advances in technology, namely social networks and user-generated online content platforms allow for increased methods of communication between the government and citizens. Public perceptions are more easily translated to messages of relevance now than at any other time during the nation's history due to these innovations.

Accordingly, the public expresses colorful opinions on the handling of the crisis during the president's first year in office culminating at the State of the Union Address, an annual speech made by the president to update the nation. The online debate allows for individuals to gather together to fulfill a variety of purposes. Firstly and arguably the most important function of the online forum, citizens are able to express their ideas, furthering the process of democracy. Secondly, they are able to gather and collaborate

ideas despite the geographic limitations that once prevented widespread cooperation prior to the advent of the Internet. Due to these factors, the sentiments and ideas of the American people can be understood on a larger and broader scale with unprecedented immediacy. Conceptualizing the ideas and the opinions of those who are governed increases the frequency and value of the dichotomy between the government and the people, allowing effective execution and implementation in legislation and future endeavors on the part of the government. Citizens can go beyond contacting their congressional or senatorial representatives and can do more via participation on political SNS to directly articulate a position or make a recommendation.

The study answers the research questions surrounding not only the use of political SNS, but also what Americans are saying about the current state of the nation and the way in which they conceptualize those themes. The findings of the study are rich and varied, and therefore are divided according to the public perception of crises, goals articulated by the public, the government response, and suggestions for change.

The first section, public perception of crises, examines the three most apparent issues of national relevance from the public's point of view. Since the main research question is to analyze how the public conceptualizes these issues, it is appropriate to begin the analysis with the public. The second section, goals articulated by the public, furthers the discussion on public conceptualization of issues by describing what citizens expect for social change and therefore is discussed in this particular order. The government response looks at initiatives the Obama Administration has taken and what its central messages and intentions are in taking part in the online public sphere. It also examines the collaboration of citizens online and analyzes the response that the Obama

Administration has put forth in reaction to the crisis on the level of communication methods and enhancements in terms of transparency. Finally, suggestions for change are elaborated upon according to the synthesis of the findings and suggestions from the literature review as guided by the theoretical framework of the thesis.

Public Perception of Crises

The main areas of discussion found in the online forums are the issues surrounding the crisis. The economy, healthcare and the War on Terror, namely the U.S. engagement in Afghanistan are the leading issues as the topics of conversations on the forums. As a result of those issues' prevalence, they are at the center of the crisis in America, and therefore are the aim of social change. The goal of the thesis is not to define what crisis is, but rather, to garner an understanding of the various crises that Americans label as such and study the government interplay with citizens as a result of those crises. The sample, bearing the same findings as the pilot study, reflects the sentiments and lenses of observation through which Americans understand the state of the nation and the messages and actions that the government is positing. SNS are a unique forum for the government conjecture to manifest in a manner of wide-spread reach to which citizens can respond. The response to the government is exhibited through user-generated commentary and questions as a form of expression, very similar to Habermas' public sphere model. This section is divided according to the understanding of the issues and found to be the most widely discussed topics taking place in the online forum and are briefly presented here as they are understood by citizens. Greater attention is given to the three topics throughout the remainder of the findings and analysis.

The Economic Crisis

The number one issue that concerns Americans the most is jobs. It is not news that the recession has caused millions of citizens to lose their jobs, driving the national unemployment rate to a staggering 10 percent (www.bls.gov.cps/). As a result of widespread unemployment, people have less money to spend, and less disposable income translates to the furthering of the economic recession. A popular and repeated message thread in the forums is for users to write “JOBS JOBS JOBS JOBS...” several times over. Americans are acutely aware of the implications, and as unemployment benefits come to an end for some or simply just do not exist for others, a pervading sense of both worry and anger culminate in the online forum.

The forums are filled with personal stories of individuals who have lost their jobs and consequently, are struggling to make ends meet. One user¹⁰ writes, “Both my husband and myself are currently unemployed. Also we have no health insurance and cannot afford to purchase any. I think it’s outrageous that an illegal immigrant can get Public Aid, but an American Citizen cannot. Both of us have health issues that need to be addressed, but can't because we cannot afford to go to a doctor...” (UserE1). Many of the issues presented on the forums are intertwined with the problems of the crisis, and users express their dismay with the general state of the economy. The economic crisis has a ripple effect on the state of the nation. Americans recognize this and is a main reason why

¹⁰ The comments are coded to protect the identity of the users. While some studies mention the date and time of the post, the thesis does not do so since the page (Facebook or YouTube) is identified and the user can be easily tracked by logging online. They are coded according to issue (E for economy, H for health care, and W for war, and then assigned a number according to the order in which they appear in the thesis. This protects the anonymity of the social network user and does not allow them to be tracked online.

having a strong and fluid job market are essential to the progress of the nation according to most of the opinions expressed in the sample.

As the president stated in his State of the Union Address, small business is the driving force of the capitalistic economy on which the United States prides itself. The conversation threads show the need for small business funding from both the government and banks. Small business owners comment on the need for more credit to be made available. They argue that stimulus money given to the banks should be returned to the tax payers through increased availability of credit, loans, and government subsidies. Small business owners would like to see incentives toward hiring more staff and providing health insurance coverage, as the current costs of such programs are increasingly unaffordable for most small businesses. Problems range in severity; one small business owner writes, "I am a small business owner and had to close because I could not afford the rent..." (UserE2). Another writes, "My husband and I had great credit until this recession. We are small business owners...our business has totally went under, we are on unemployment, have the IRS taking out liens on us, and the bank's not willing to help us. We are facing foreclosure on our house with no light at the end of this tunnel. Can you help us please" (UserE3).

Another issue regarding jobs that has been discussed prior to the crisis but more so now is outsourcing. Since jobs are scarce, Americans are calling for the return of jobs stateside rather than outsourcing to other countries at a cheaper rate of labor. The discussions surrounding outsourcing often fault the practice as a main contributor, if not precipitator, to the moribund economy. "Stop letting the Corporations and the banks screw over middle class Americans and reverse the outsourcing of our jobs which is a

huge reason why our economy is still stagnant” (UserE4). While outsourcing saves businesses millions of dollars annually, it is no secret that it takes away from the American labor industry by sending jobs overseas. Some in the forums pointed out that outsourcing allows for the cost of goods to be produced, and therefore sold, at a cheaper rate, but the argument is countered with the fact that jobs are lost as a result. Another argument expressed regarding outsourcing is that the economy is already suffering and Americans have trouble finding jobs stateside. Some users question the prudence in returning those jobs to the U.S. One user writes, “What kind of jobs would we have if they all came home?” (UserE5).

Tied in with the economic crisis is social security. The Social Security Administration distributes retirement and disability benefits and is funded through tax payer dollars. Many are concerned, however, that in the next few decades, social security will be bankrupt and will cease to operate, leaving millions of elderly and disabled individuals with no source of income. “How are we going to pay for Social Security when more people are taking it than there are working, and how will we continue to pay it to the people who want Social Security?” (UserE6). Another writes, “As far as Social Security, I will never see a dime of it by the time I get to retiring age” (UserE7). Some propose adding social security spending to the spending freeze that Obama has proposed, while others agree that it should continue to receive funding and be dispersed to those who are entitled.

The economic crisis is understood and discussed in the online community as the most important issue to be resolved during this time of national calamity. While Americans’ ideologies range from the left to right of the political spectrum, all those who

comment on the state of the economy agree that something must be done. The degree to which citizens want the government to intervene and the extent to which programs and initiatives are subsidized varies, yet all seem to understand the need for improvement on a wide-ranging national scale. Fixing the economy is essential according to the posted comments because without a strong economy, the health care system cannot be fixed, nor can America's engagement in the Middle East reach an expeditious conclusion. The government can neither fund a health care system barring the presence of a strong U.S. dollar, nor can it continue to adequately support the troops in providing necessary tools of war or programs to assist in the combat of terror and protection of national security. The desire of the American people to achieve a stable and prosperous economy reverberates throughout the online community in appeals to not only the government, but also to one another, for prompt remedies.

The Health Care Crisis

Since Obama first appeared as a contender to the presidential seat, his platform has greatly centered on the national health care crisis. The United States currently does not have a government option for health care, aside from Medicare and Medicaid, which are meant for qualifying elderly and low-income families, respectively. While private insurance is the other option, it is an expensive and often exorbitant purchase regardless of whether it is acquired through one's employer, as a family, or individually. In addition, costly premiums and prescription plans often make insurance cripplingly unaffordable for many Americans. Currently, the United States has more than 31 million uninsured

Americans. While carrying insurance is not required¹¹, one runs the risk of carrying monumental debt throughout a lifetime if he or she elects to live without coverage. Americans are keenly aware of the health care situation, yet the forums indicate that they are divided when it comes to a government-sponsored health care option, especially since more power is given to the I.R.S. to enforce government health care should it pass all stages of legislation. Many Americans fear it will increase taxes further financially burdening families.

The dividing line on the health care debate centers on political grounds. The Republican Party is largely opposed to health care reform in its current proposal. Obama has proposed a government option for health care in which citizens can purchase a subsidized insurance plan that is meant to compete with the conventional insurance industry. It would provide an option for those who do not have the means for private insurance, yet do not qualify for the current government aid health care. The passage of the proposal, however, has been met with resistance. Proponents of the government option accuse Republicans of siding with big insurance companies and lobbyists on account of their inability, or refusal, to reach a partisan agreement on health reform. One YouTube comment reads, "He [Obama] needs to work on health care. News Flash. The GOP does not want reform due to the millions, not thousands, but millions they will lose in campaign contributions. Again, Obama wants fair and, equality for all. The way it should be" (UserH1). Another comment reads, Our True HEALTH sees no Wealth... we

¹¹ Since the passage of the health care bill in the House of Representatives, H.R. 3200, on March 23, 2010, gives power to the Internal Revenue Service, IRS, to levy taxes on individuals who opt to not carry insurance or purchase insurance that is not up to the standards as determined by the IRS. Currently, the bill is undergoing reconciliation in the senate and the implications of not carrying health insurance cannot be determined at the time of writing the thesis.

ALL will need HEALTH CARE sooner or later, NOT insurance! Let's cut out the GREEDY middle men, "insurance companies", and just socialize HEALTH CARE... other Nations have already figured this out!" (UserH2). Republicans counter the argument by alleging that the health care bill is unconstitutional since it would levy a tax on individuals who decline coverage.

The other understanding that is expressed on the forums regarding health care is fear of over-taxation. Many felt that while the option for universal coverage may be "nice", the fact of the matter is that it may cost taxpayers more money. A tax increase during a financial crisis is undoubtedly an unwelcomed prospect to most citizens. Comments such as "NO TAX ON HEALTHCARE BENEFITS!!!! WE NEED JOBS" (UserH3) are scattered in conversation threads that were not initiated as ones meant for a discussion on health care. When the conversation in the sample changes, it often makes mention of the health care crisis, "Well when I hear the truth and something that would actually benefit the nation as a whole without giving too much power to the central government which our Founding Fathers wanted to avoid, I would be more than happy to take another look. The GOP's¹² are certainly not the liars here" (UserH4).

Also in the health care debate exists a notion of neither support nor approval for a public option, but a push to change the regulatory status of the insurance industry. Mention of the insurance industry in the United States often conjures feelings of ill-sentiments and skepticism, coupled with accusations of greed and unethical practices according the expressions made online. However, they do not want the government "meddling" in their health care. The alternative proposition to a government option and

¹² GOP is a term given to the Republic Party, which stands for Grand Old Party.

not helping those who cannot afford insurance is regulation. Users back their opinions by providing analogies and personal experiences with the insurance industry, which makes the issues more salient to other readers. One Facebook user writes, “I have just returned from visiting an elderly relative who is hospitalized and though she is insured, she is fighting to recover within a system that is determining her care based on profit not medical decisions. Insurance companies must change their basic philosophy that values outrageous profits over patients’ needs...Is this America?” (UserH5). While this particular comment did not urge a government solution to the problems that the health care system faces, the user, as many others suggest, wants to see a change within the industry as it exists today, in addition to accountability as to why an agreement cannot be met between the parties for legislation. One user writes, “What we need next is a big chart rolled out showing all of the donations to each elected official in the room ranked by amount from insurance companies, that would make for some squirming in the seats on both sides of the aisle. Let’s see who in that audience really has the best interest of the people who elected them in mind...” (UserH6). Regulation is a proposed alternative according to the expressed understanding of the online SNS community.

The War on Terror

As a result of the horrific and tragic events of September 11, 2001, the United States launched the War on Terror. Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan still wage nine years after the initial attack. Although full control of Iraq was ceded to the Iraqi government, the United States is still heavily engaged in the theater, with combat troops not scheduled to leave until June 2011. Afghanistan is no

exception. As terrorist groups find refuge in Pakistan and continue to combat NATO forces, Americans are growing increasingly impatient with the dire situation. More than 5,000 American soldiers have lost their lives in the conflict. The United States' engagement in the war is often likened to the failed attempt in Vietnam. Consequently, support for the war effort is met with significant resistance in comparison to when it first began, by both Americans and politicians.

President Obama, although he campaigned for removal of the troops from the region during the election, approved the military's request for 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan in early 2010. The nearly decade-long war has taken a toll on not only the American economy, but also on the morale of the nation. The third component of the crisis is the War on Terror, including both Iraq and Afghanistan. The Bush Administration faced accusations from the American people of a cover-up of alleged weapons of mass destruction. The war in Iraq was extremely unpopular by the end of Bush's second term, and Afghanistan is no exception. The dissatisfaction with the conflict in Afghanistan is resoundingly familiar to that of the Iraqi conflict. Not one comment in the sample showed support for prolonging America's engagement in the region.

People are demanding that the troops be brought home. The conversation threads lend support to the troops, yet support for the war is not readily expressed. One comment reads, "President Obama, we are FURIOUS that you did not offer a concrete plan to transfer your troops out of Afghanistan starting by July 2011!" (UserW1). "End the war in Afghanistan IN JULY 2011 and you'll have my vote again in 2012 (UserW2). In addition to support for the troops, some comments proposed adoption of pacifism as

national policy. One user writes, “War in our society is indiscriminate taking the lives of innocent children. War is terrorism” (UserW3). Few comments exist regarding establish an adoption of pacifist policy in the United States, but it is important to mention since it exists in the sample.

While citizens often express support for the soldiers, Americans desire to see an end to the increasingly unpopular conflict. Support for the war does exist within the sample, however, although it is not the majority sentiment. One user says that Americans are “REQUIRED and EXPECT to defend our country during the time of war” (UserW4). Another writes, “We are fighting the people who killed our own citizens on 9/11 or did you forget? They are to this day fighting us in Afghanistan and trying to strike again. I’m a Democrat and...sometimes war is needed to protect yourself” (UserW5).

The topic of war is the least popular out of the three issues of crises since most people are unaffected by it in their everyday lives. The fighting occurs off of U.S. soil and, therefore, is not readily apparent. Americans, however, recognize that keeping forces engaged in the Middle East is a drain to the economy and as a result, indirectly affects them through the form of taxes and funding cuts. Additionally, there is a lingering sense of anger trickling down from the Bush Administration and the alleged cover-up of weapons of mass destruction, especially among partisan lines. One user writes for Bush and Cheney to “OWN UP” (UserW5), another addresses the former president as “Criminal” (UserW6). This sentiment is often expressed in popular media—some alleging that the initial attack on Iraq was a personal vendetta of President George W. Bush to avenge Saddam Hussein on behalf of his father, who served as president during

the Gulf War. Consequently, furthering the war effort only hastens the sense of pervasive resentment and burden that accompanies the mention of the conflict in the Middle East.

In conceptualizing the three main issues of the crisis, Americans are better able to understand what problems plague the nation and the degree to which they impact everyday life. Deliberating in a public arena, the online forum is much like Habermas' public sphere in that it provides a medium through which goals can be articulated and social action be discussed. Commenting on the government's message board also allows for Castells' mass self-communication and is conducive to citizens to channeling their passions, according to James. In conjunction with Arendt's theory on collective action and pluralism, society has a genuine chance at change.

The Publics Sentiments

Citizens conceptualize the issues of the crisis by gathering information through various media, deliberating with one another, and drawing their own conclusions. The feelings and sentiments generated as a result of their conceptualization of issues, however, is a separate entity that can further provide insight into how Americans feel about certain issues. It exposes the way in which they think of issues and the deeply rooted feelings they hold. The following sentiments are embedded between the topics of conversation and tone of comments within the sample. They are a manifestation of the perceptions of the issues of the crisis.

Sense of Blame

Prior to the State of the Union Address, Americans, the media, and even politicians were quick to criticize the lack of progress made in Washington in the areas of healthcare reform and foreign policy. President Obama called for Democrats and Republicans to work together in order to create and pass legislation that Americans want and need. Americans are expressing their anger and dissatisfaction in the way that Congress and the Senate are “bickering” with one another and not passing important legislation for political alliances. Democrats have accused Republicans of purposely stalling the healthcare bill for the sake of political detriment to the other party. This accusation is being expressed both on the political and citizen level, and is a widely held perception in the online realm.

Another type of blame identified is the transfer of responsibility of the nation’s problems to the Bush Administration. While engaging in often heated debates, users sometimes shift blame to the Bush presidency as a defense for why Obama’s promised “changes” have not come to full fruition. This is often a point of argument for those who identify themselves as Democrats and is met with strong rebuttal from Republicans who find the defense weak, untrue or irrelevant. When the conversation takes this course, it usually ends in profane verbal attacks on users within the thread, especially when Obama’s declining popularity in the polls is mentioned.

Another angle to the sense of blame is a call for partisanship. Americans are growing tired of the rat-race political battling that seems to be unyielding in Washington. One user¹³ posted that George Washington, the nation’s first president, warned of the

¹³ In this section, Sentiments, any comment left by a user is coded as User S proceeded by the number. The letter S stands for sentiment.

danger of political parties, and went on to write, “Unionship not bi-partisanship! Definition of Union, a group of states or nations united into one political body. We are not the Republican States of America or the Democratic States of America. We are the United States of America. Let’s act that way!” (UserS1). In a separate discussion thread, another wrote “if only the dems and reps would start working together for the good of the people in lieu of the good of the party, it would be refreshing... and then maybe we could see some change” (UserS2). This sentiment is a wide-spread one that permeates many of the threads in the online forum. In times of crisis, citizens band together, like James contends in his theory, and many individuals recognize that the way to work through a problem is by working together.

Users also critique the behavior of the Republican side of the House of Representatives during the State of the Union Address for not standing or applauding at nearly any positive statement the president made. This was especially apparent on the two social media sites during the actual speech. “Why wouldn't some members of congress stand when he announced a tax break for companies creating jobs IN the US? Does that mean they don't like the thought of supporting companies that create jobs?” (UserS3). Comments of this nature were very rampant throughout one section of the sample, furthered by this comments, “The Republicans are so smug and unengaged. They are not displaying the bipartisanship and unity needed for this country to flourish. What a POOR example for those who hang off their every word and action!” (UserS4). The nonverbal communication that the Republican Party displayed during the president’s address angered many users, some of which identified themselves as Republicans. Despite the

pervasive sense of dissatisfaction with the behavior of the bicameral legislature, users expressed both positive and negative feelings toward Obama.

Feelings Toward Obama

As with all presidential administrations, citizens will hold differing views of their commander in chief varying from apathy, disapproval, and whole hearted support. While Obama's approval rating in the polls has declined since his inauguration, the overall sense as conveyed in the sample is one of approval. The main sentiment surrounding Obama is that he has promised change, and while it is not easy to accomplish this in one term, let alone a single year in office. Americans are willing to wait for these changes, so long as the promises are fulfilled and politicians are showing a concerted effort in working across party lines. The sample indicates a sense of compassion for Obama and his having to work with a House of Representatives that is engaging in partisanship and being slow to effectively pass legislation in a timely, bipartisan manner. As previously discussed, Americans are growing despondent with the slow moving progress in Washington, and are placing the blame on politicians for intertwining their political motivations with their duties and responsibilities to their constituents. Americans want results. It is when politics get in the way of these results that they grow intolerant of waiting for them to come to fruition.

The forums in the sample contain a plethora of praises for Obama. Statements that lend support to the president such as, "We're behind you...thanks for making us proud!" (UserS5), and "I don't know how anyone could have watched that speech and not be inspired. The people who bash this wonderful positive hopeful attitude should be shunned

for their sinicism. The cup is half full and progress is made by keeping this view. Fantastic job Mr President. I also can't wait for 2012, to vote for you again!" (UserS6), comprise the majority of the sample. Americans seem to believe in the president, albeit for the reason of having nothing else to believe in. "Finally- Accountability in the White House...Thank You!" (UserS7).

While the majority express approval and encouragement to the president, it is only natural for others to counter these comments. Some users accuse Obama of being a socialist. Obama has claimed responsibility for the problems that his administration faces, even though many of them existed prior to his presidency. He has also been proactive in the media with assuaging the worries and concerns of Americans in the administration's attempt at fixing the nation's problems. One of the methods through which he has done so is through frequent communication on SNS. Users notice this as the sample contains a significant amount of people expressing their gratitude for what they perceive to be an open line of nearly direct communication with the government, such as this posting, "Thank you. I feel like you answered all of my questions. And I feel a lot better now..." (UserS8). A trend exists with users in terms of their support. They wish to see accountability, and when efforts for transparency are made visible to the American people, more support is lent to the effort at hand. "Very good speech...but I want to see actions. You want earmarks website. Posting of lobbyist donations. I agree, Mr. President lead by example. Post a complete list of those who donated to your campaign. Members of Congress on both sides would have to follow your example" (UserS9).

Equality

Equality in the United States is considered a founding principle of the nation. After the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Suffrage Movement, Americans pride themselves on living in a country that champions the principles of basic human rights. The issue of equality is still a point of debate, however, in the gay and lesbian community. Homosexuals still cannot marry in most states. President Obama announced during the State of the Union Address that he will work with Congress to appeal the military's policy of "Don't Ask Don't Tell" (DADT), which stipulates that any homosexual individual cannot openly show their sexual orientation during military service, or they will risk being removed from the military or barred from joining in the first place.

The announcement was met with nearly full support in the online forum¹⁴. Many found it preposterous that a person is prevented from serving their nation because of his or her sexual orientation. Users allege that it is anti-American and unpatriotic for the military to adhere to such a rule. Few people express opposition to the removal of DADT. One user writes, "Openly gay people serving will only cause problems and unnecessary tensions among the troops and ultimately get people killed. The Joint Chiefs know this and that is why they sat there with their arms folded" (UserS10). Additionally, "Repealing Don't Ask Don't Tell will cause problems in war time" (UserS11), and "We

¹⁴ It is plausible that this issue was met with near full support because those who are the most interested in commenting are those who find it the most relevant to their lives. Whereas the economy, health care, and war affect all citizens, repealing of DADT is not important or relevant to the majority of Americans. It is important to note this because it may be a false representation of how Americans in general feel about DADT.

have more important things to think about during war” (UserS12) represent some of the comments that were left in opposition to the removal of DADT. Others counter the argument with statements such as, “...service members in every war since the civil war has fought a long side gays and lesbians, they deserve to be themselves while protecting our country” (UserS13). While protests do exist to the repealing of DADT, the theme of equality is made salient in this particular issue with an overwhelming majority in favor of the legislation that would allow homosexual Americans to serve their country.

A further issue of equality heavily discussed in the sample is the notion of universal health care. While the U.S. is a capitalist country, with the dividing line between the wealthy and poor a sharp and unmistakable contrast, many users express that universal health care is in fact a human right. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi claimed after the passage of the health care bill that the Declaration of Independence, which guarantees the right to the pursuit of happiness by extension gives Americans the right to access health care. Supporters of the bill articulate this point in the online forum, but even those who oppose the health care bill often relay a similar sentiment, that those who cannot afford coverage still deserve medical attention.

Historically, the sentiment of equality in health care access is evident in the passage of Medicare and Medicaid nearly half a century ago, as previously articulated, and in the Patient’s Bill of Rights, passed in 2001, which guarantees certain medical rights. “We ALL need healthcare” (UserS14). Much like a hospital cannot deny medical attention to an individual with a life threatening emergency, Americans, at least those who have expressed this sentiment in the online forum, feel as though all should be given

quality coverage that centers on prevention and quality care rather than a life or death emergency.

Fears of Socialism

The Democratic Party, which currently holds the majority of seats in the House of Representatives, advocates more government intervention, which some view in the more negative term as “interference”. Democrats advocate more spending, more social programs, and more money for increased government initiatives. Despite the bona fide intentions of the proposed initiatives, many fear that with more government programs, socialism has a chance to permeate the system. Since the birth of the United States, a fundamental central to the culture has been a “laissez-faire” attitude in that government should allow business and economy to grow on its own, free of big government influence and excessive legislation. This is a central ideal of Americans, and their widespread fear of socialism, or worse, communism is not a new concept. As recent as the 1950s and the era of Senator McCarthy’s “witch hunt” for Japanese-American communists, Americans have feared extreme government control. The Kennedy and Reagan Administration engaged in the Cold War centered on communist aggression, in addition to the Korean and Vietnam Wars were also fought in the name of combating communism, despite the thousands of lives claimed on both sides during the conflicts.

Americans also express hesitance to a system of government that promotes the distribution of wealth, as does socialism. One YouTube user writes, “But why should I pay more taxes just because I have a good job... I mean I am looking not just at health care but Education which I may never utilize again. I pay more than my fair share of

taxes state, local and federal. I mean my friend has three kids makes more money than me, but I pay more taxes! I just get tired of feeling like I am struggling with my bills and be punished for working and making a living” (UserS15). The conversation on socialism in this particular YouTube thread hosted a discussion on the rejection of socialistic aspects of government. “We reject socialism period. He won't listen to the outcry of citizens and he wants to create more governments jobs that means more money for the labor union and more tax hike. Wake up people” (UserS16). While the administration has never, and will never, promote socialism as a way of governance, as it is against the constitution, the very mention of programs and aspects of socialistic government conjures heightened emotions of fear and protest.

Others disagree regarding the fear of socialism. The conversation, both claiming socialism and countering it, is brought up mostly in threads regarding health care. One comment states, “We need health care for all Americans and Medicare for all is not communist, socialist, fascist or anything else except just good old fashioned common sense. And our president is NOT a communist, thank you very much” (UserS17). Comments in response to accusations of communism or socialism often take defensive tones, as those making claims against it voice their views of it being preposterous and anti-American. Some users take personal offense to claims of socialism, especially a few users who claimed that the alleged socialism came nowhere near the true meaning of the word. “You have no idea what real socialism is” (UserS18).

The sentiment is no different today. The health care crisis and Wall Street bailout are the two most discussed issues found in the sample in relation to socialism. Many commented that a public health care option would lead the nation one step closer to

becoming a socialist country. Several users likened the proposed future healthcare system of the United States to the “failed” healthcare system of Canada. Few users in the sample argued against the notion that universal healthcare is socialist. One user points out, “When it comes to health care reform, I have heard so many people say that it is ‘socialist’. Ummmm, do you realize that not all countries that have universal health care are socialist countries?” (UserS19). The majority on the topic of socialism, however, are highly critical of universal healthcare in fear of the inevitable redistribution of wealth that they fear will accompany the passage of this legislation.

The expressed views in the sample also connote a need for justice. Anger at the injustice of the bailout and the implications of the large scale spending transferred to generations of future Americans conjures anger, but the deeper underlying sentiment, often not verbally expressed, is the desire for justice to be brought to those who spurred the economic crisis. While few comments in the sample actually described this, it is tied in with the sentiment of anger since the solution to quelling the disapproval would be rectification of justice, especially regarding the financial crisis.

The sentiments expressed in the sample span multiple issues of the crisis, yet conjure the same feelings. In response to these opinions, which are as a result of the public’s understanding of concepts, the results are manifested as goals articulated by citizens. Occurring in the online public sphere, the goals are a materialization of the theoretical framework of the thesis in that it is a result of mass self-communication, collective action, and pluralism at work. The following section articulates the synthesis of these sentiments.

Goals Articulated by the Public

As a result of the various sentiments and ideologies identified, various goals and aims that the American people wish to achieve are expressed throughout the sample. The goals vary in terms of concreteness, but are described in relation to the expressed attitudes and opinions found in the online forum. The following section looks at goals of the public, while the one after in the section entitled The Government Response investigates goals of the government in fostering two-way communication and meeting the demands and needs of the populace.

Increased Ethical Standards

The notion of ethics is a broad term that holds different meanings across cultures and subcultures in the United States. One area of agreement, however, is found to be in the handling of the financial crisis. The forums are replete with users commenting their anger on the Wall Street bailout, not necessarily because of the fiscal spending, but due to the fact that greed was behind the initial collapse of the financial system, according to widely held perceptions. Many posts on the forums and conversation threads refer to bankers in derogatory terms such as “pigs”. Americans are calling for increased accountability on the part of the government and financial institutions which received bailout funds. Ethical considerations are also brought against politicians in Washington for “grid-locking” the passage of important legislation, such as universal health care.

The current perception of the American health care system is previously discussed, however, it is still important to users to not only address concerns about how to handle the crisis, but also communicate their perception of the ethical implications of

not passing the legislation. In other words, users propose ideas on how the health care system should be run, whether a government public option or increased regulation of the insurance industry is needed, and also hold discussions on how they feel about health care. The sample reflects the cultural notion of helping one another out, but also holds accountable the politicians who choose not to pass a health care bill due to partisanship. In the view of many users, allowing people to suffer because of political gains is nearly immoral.

As the thesis has already established, the use of online social network sites allows for increased accountability and transparency in Washington. The government is afforded the opportunity to communicate with citizens through an increasingly popular medium, and in turn, Americans are able to express their views by their constitutional rights of free speech in an expedited and open manner. While e-government allows for the functioning of local, state, and federal transactions vital to the operation of efficient governance and society, communicating through SNS takes place on a different level, allowing sentiments and ideologies to be expressed. Transparency has an opportune advantage at taking place, and in turn, can positively affect social change.

Cooperation

After the horrific events of September 11, 2001, Americans were increasingly willing to band together in terms of patriotism and supporting the war effort. This was because of the overwhelming sense of helplessness in a crisis that had never been previously experienced. Americans had never been attacked on their own turf during peacetime, and because of the surprise and shock, it seemed as though everyone was willing to work

together, help each other out, and espouse the ideals of iconic Americanism. Nine years after the terrorist attacks, America finds itself in yet another crisis, and a wide sense of cooperation is again permeating the discussion. The advent of the online community and its growth since the onset of the war has provided a place for Americans to rekindle their sense of patriotism and call for cooperation among one another.

When President Obama stated during the address that America does not belong in second place, the online forum for the State of the Union saw rapid activity with people calling for togetherness and cooperation with one another to change the course of the country's direction. Americans are dissatisfied with the direction in which the nation is heading overall, and while the exact changes that need to be made are not always necessarily agreed upon, the content on the forums calls for a joint cooperative attitude and spirit. An overwhelming way of working together according to forum users is to quit political bipartisanship and bickering. As one user articulated, "Give me first place or give me DEATH!!! USA BABY!!! LET'S DO THIS!!! WE GOTTA WORK TOGETHER!!!" (UserS20). Cooperation extends beyond the parties working together to pass legislation expeditiously. While many convey their dissatisfaction, the majority express their way of contributing to participation by lending their support to the progress that has been made in the one year span Obama has been in office. One of the many examples of this sentiment is found in this user's post, "Republican, Democrat or Independent...Regardless of your politics, if you voted for President Obama or not, we should all be hopeful for American's future. Success is our only option... failure is not" (UserS21). Hope and support is a method of cooperation.

Cooperation is also expressed in the encouragement of compromising. The forums show the frustration of Americans in watching their representatives, neighbors, and media outlets battle ideologies that ultimately bear the greatest effect on Americans. Throughout the sample, an increased number of users express their desire for cooperation among the parties and the people. One post read, “50/50 people fighting against each other will never accomplish anything. It did nothing for us during the Bush Era and is doing nothing for us now. I teach my children to compromise...why can't our government learn this too?” (UserS22). On the same forum, a nearby post read “Time to get to work guys this means us!” (UserS23).

Multiple posts in the forum thread veer off-topic to discuss other users on the forum. Debates often take angry tones in reference to posts with irrelevant or unjustified comments. As a fictitious example, a user will say, “@johnsmith, could you please articulate your point? You have no valid examples”. Although it was not often that the addressed person would reengage themselves in the thread, other users would either defend or present a rebuttal for the statement in question. One user writes, “@UserS23, I am with you. I keep reading some of these bashing comments and thinking, ‘Did you actually even listen to the address tonight?’ People will make time to turn on the ‘entertainment’ show Glenn Beck to get their ‘news’ but they won't even listen to a Presidential Address. So disheartening” (UserS24). Another writes, “If you are going to criticize the speech, please be articulate about what you did not like. And, perhaps, offer a better policy” (UserS25). The online forum provides a platform for cooperation through debate, not only about the government, but also about users’ points of view, and is conducive to the advancement and sustainment of democracy.

The online community has praised the Obama Administration and specifically YouTube for enabling the transparency of communication between the White House and Americans through debates and clear, unedited forums through which all users, American or otherwise, can express opinions and disseminate information. The wall posts of the online video from YouTube with President Obama were cluttered with comments of people saying “thank you” to both the president and the website for hosting an unprecedented event in which thousands could watch and participate. Comments such as, “Thanks for the technology” (UserS26) and “I appreciate it” (UserS27) were common. One user writes during a heated debate on the progress of Obama’s changes that more people should be participating and that the number of users should reach the tens of thousands. Although critical of one another’s opinions and political alignments, Americans appear to want a lively debate in which all sides of the argument can be heard, a debate from which wide-spread cooperation can be facilitated and occur. This notion of widespread participation is in line with James’ theory on society coming together with their passions and Arendt’s theory on collective action. The union of the two theories allows for the increased chance of social change coming to fruition.

Grassroots Efforts for Social Change

Obama preached social change during his campaign and continues to do so one year in to his presidency. His campaign gained popularity from the base of the populace, and many users echo this sentiment, regardless of their political affiliations. “If we can rise up and support the President...we may actually have a chance to get this right...but if we want to see action from our politicians the best way to get them moving, is act ourselves! Speak

up and be heard!” (UserS28). The notion for grassroots efforts has shifted from overwhelming positivity during his campaign in the effort of changing the state of the nation to a sense of grassroots effort for changing the direction of the Washington.

While many users still advocate change through volunteering in the local community, helping one another out, etc., the majority of the comments urge for the people to promote change through two main ways. A comment from a single poster succinctly summarizes the sentiment that many of the participants in the forum express, “To everyone who voted for the President and are disillusioned: You have to remember that voting is not enough. Volunteer, get involved in your community, contact your senator or congressman, get involved in your local politics and/or start a business. Be the change you want to see in the world” (UserS29). Another comment reads, “For those who didn’t like what the President had to say or don’t agree with his plan..... he asked for suggestions!!!!!!! Everybody needs to contact their representatives and political leaders and challenge them to do business or they will lose your vote. Pay attention to what is going on. Don’t get caught up and not pay attention to the decisions that are being made by the people you put in office. Stand for something or sit down” (UserS30).

On a similar point, some users comment during contentious debates about the progress of Obama, or lack thereof, and defend the changes that have been made so far. Nearly all conversations throughout all forum threads address the fact that Obama has been in office for only one year, and while many of the changes he proposed during his campaign have not yet come to fruition or have been met with resistance, commentary largely focuses on this. While many are frustrated with the lack of rapid progress, his relatively recent inauguration to office is acknowledged. At the same time, however,

users comment that the current state of the nation is not acceptable. They worry that unemployment, the financial crisis, and the health care system, and continual war are contributing to the rapid decline of the country that is known around the world as the super power. Americans in general take great pride in their country, and the users of the sampled SNS are no exception. Their comments often revolve around social change or improvement, even though they do not always label it as such.

The notion of social change through grassroots efforts is not new. The Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s was spurred through this sentiment, and today, when the nation is undergoing such change, similar desires resound within the American conversation. James spoke of social action through the collective passion of the people. In his day, grassroots may not have been a coined term, but in closely reading his works, he writes of the same idea. Arendt's writings express the same view. Collectively through society, change can occur through citizens acting in unison to achieve goals. As an example, James writes of social change through volunteering through any means possible, whether on a small scale or large—this is an example of grassroots efforts for the betterment of society.

The Government Response

Measuring the public's sentiments, conceptualizations, and suggestions for change only partially answers the research questions. The thesis seeks to understand the two-way communication between the government and the public, therefore, it is imperative to examine the government response to the public outcry for social change. Not only is it important to understand how the government is participating in this new digital age of

communication, but also it is imperative to understand what they are communicating. What messages, unspoken or otherwise, is the government, in this case the Obama White House, communicating to the people? The fact that the administration heavily relies on SNS to communicate provides insight into this research question. This section looks at the government response and how it facilitates crisis communication via social media.

Ease of Access and Purposeful Use of SNS

In addition to providing a forum through which citizens can convey their criticisms, the White House also uses SNS for the purpose of communicating multi-media messages that are conducive to improving and encouraging greater two-way communication between government and citizens. Posting the videos on popular sites allows them to be viewed on demand in addition to having the chance to reach a greater number of people than traditional television media. Throughout the sample, the White House posted messages on its Facebook site that answered questions and allowed users to comment on the answers. On YouTube, the White House called for citizens to either videotape or write questions that the president would answer in an interview format.

The videos provide a method through which transparency can occur since the questions answered were user-generated, while also affording education about the various government programs and initiatives for change that may have otherwise gone unnoticed. An example of the types of videos that the White House posted on its Facebook page was an application that allowed users to click on an external link and view the president's cabinet members. The members recorded videos explaining their role in the administration and the progress that their various postings have made since the

president's inauguration. Since the link was posted on Facebook, users could comment under the link expressing their critique of the administration and cabinet.

Posting content on popular social media sites, such as Facebook and YouTube, reaches a segment of the population that may not be familiar with accessing the White House's page. Because of the widespread popularity of these SNS, the government is able to reach more citizens and therefore communicate more effectively. By making the message more available to a wider variety of people, enhanced levels of two-way communication can take place. Furthermore, given the ease of using SNS, users are more familiar with posting on walls and conversation threads rather than the White House's page, which does not have the same collaborative design as Facebook or YouTube's wall feature. This is in alignment with Habermas' validity claims in that the requirement of clear communication between the communicator and the receiver is fulfilled.

Permitting easy access when technology allows for it is a responsibility of the government. By keeping up with the evolving communication standards of society, the White House increases its expressed goal of transparency and furthers citizens' chances of experiencing accountability. Furthermore, doing so is conducive to social change since it fosters a sense of unity and activism among social network participants. Using SNS for purposeful endeavors, such as communicating with the government, collaborating with one another, deciding on a social goal, or simply reading what others have to say is central to the tenets of democratic society.

Transparency

The public often complains that the government is not doing enough to fix the crisis, but that may be because they are simply unaware of the progress that has already been made. Proactive initiatives may go undetected due to the high volume of news and information that is reported each day through traditional media. Furthermore, traditional media may only pick up stories that are apt to bringing in higher ratings since it is in their best interest to do so. The government response through SNS allows for not only greater transparency, but also for increased awareness and public communication through a two-way forum. As one user writes, "I'm watching..thanks for the technology!" (UserS31). The fact that the administration is heavily utilizing SNS demonstrates to citizens interacting online that the government is willing to hear ideas and engage with the public in the discourse involving the issues of the day.

The issues are made salient through the concerns raised in the public eye. Traditional media plays host to citizen's concerns by covering stories and presenting the problems that ordinary Americans are facing. Engaging in SNS allows the government response to be unfiltered by the media's lens and promotes greater direct communication with citizens. Limiting traditional media interference is a newly deciphered goal of the Obama Administration, evident not only in a recent announcement made by the White House (*White House revamps communication strategy*, February 15, 2010), but also the way in which the White House actively pursues live communication in the online community. Furthermore, the fact that user commentary is unedited regardless of the political tone it takes is another example of the transparency that the administration seeks to implement.

Posting blogs, belonging to various SNS, and answering citizen and user-generated questions directly, as in the YouTube video discussed in the sample, is not only an unprecedented effort on the part of any presidential office, but also allows for the transfer of new ideas and collaboration on a three-way level. The government can communicate a message allowing citizens to respond to not only the government's message, but also collaborate with one another. Doing so is in line with Habermas' validity claims. The third validity claim is especially applicable since it calls for the message to be carefully articulated in order for the receiver of the message to fully comprehend that which is being communicated.

Conveyed Messages

The sample includes a variety of government-initiated topics ranging from strategic policy announcements to quotes of the president's State of the Union Address. User-generated questions and commentary center on the progress of the past year and the conversation within the threads is repetitive. This is important to know since the redundancy of the comments supports the findings of the study in that Americans have similar responses to one another in terms of what they view as important and how those ideas are conceptualized in the public eye. The government's response centers around those ideologies since users publicly decry their concerns and are in unison with one another. While ideas and proposed solutions differ, the same issues are being talked about, and the government has a unique opportunity to gather those comments and questions and base not only its communications strategy on it, but also the manner in

which it handles the passage of legislation and the direction in which it proceeds in fixing the crisis.

Three underlying messages are deciphered in the sample. The first is the government's conveyance of hope. By quoting the president's words that are intended to be inspirational, the White House seeks to gather support and a sense of hope for the future among users. The sample found several instances in which the Facebook wall had quotes that President Obama said during the State of the Union Address. The response from the public was overwhelmingly positive; individuals responded with the same tone of hope and positivity that the White House conveyed. Doing so is important to the political agenda of the presidency because it garners support among citizens which translates to support for the administration. It is also important to social change activists because, in accordance with James' theory on social change, the channeling of passion is the first step to enact change.

Another message the White House puts forth is dedication. The sample found quotes from the President that reassured the progress and measures taken to ensure change in the right direction. Also, constantly posting on social media, updating various SNS pages, and encouraging comments and collaboration among users convey a sense of dedication to government transparency and democracy. The government's participation in SNS demonstrates its response to the demands of the people in facilitating an easily accessible government that upholds the tenets of free speech. Furthermore, participation allows the government to demonstrate its continued efforts for fixing the damage done to the nation as a result of the various crises. Steadfast dedication in communicating reflects on the administration's dedication to alleviating the state of the nation.

The final message the government conveys as a goal is educating the public through the increasingly popular medium of social media. Beyond allowing users to openly comment on the White House's wall or YouTube videos, the administration frequently posts links and reminders to its various pages that are meant to educate the public. As mentioned, the sample contained a link posted by the White House that brought users to a video page that briefly described each cabinet member's role. The video was personally recorded by each member and shed insight into the function of that particular position. Participating in a question and answer session hosted by YouTube in which citizens could raise questions also points to the administration's efforts to educate the public through unconventional yet modern means.

Encouragement of Bipartisanship

The White House has adopted a policy of increased citizen communication through new goals articulated in February 2009 which called for greater transparency and accessibility to citizens (Shear, 2010). The named issues of the crisis are at the forefront of the concerns. Economy, health care, and the War in Afghanistan are critical issues in state of the nation evident not only in the discourse of citizens, but also in the concerns raised by the Obama White House.

In handling these concerns, President Obama has urged both sides of the house and senate to react speedily in rectifying the problems. His advice to doing so is to avoid partisanship and work across party lines, which in his view, would be conducive to finding solutions to the crisis. The sample shows that users feel the same way and want decisions to be reached in a timely manner without political bickering. The government's

response to the people's request is to publicly uphold what citizens are saying regarding partisanship and encourage politicians to honor the wishes of their constituents in the expeditious passage of resolutions to the problems crippling the state of the nation.

By heavily utilizing political SNS, the administration is encouraging Americans belonging to all political parties to participate in the discussion. The intended effect is for citizens to become actively engaged in politics, and a consequence of political participation is for constituents to petition their local congress men and women to bring about the change that society desires. This is the historical and intended role of having elected representatives; the difference rests in the manner in which they are petitioned and contacted. Whereas citizens could only contact their elected officials through letters, phone calls, and more recently email, they now have the means to do so through online social media platforms. Using new technology promotes faster resolution of issues and grants more people the opportunity to participate.

Suggestions for Change

The sample identifies not only the issues that are of the most importance to Americans, but also provides insight into how those issues are understood and conceptualized. Users participating in political SNS leave commentary not only for the sake of having conversation and critical debate with fellow users, but also in hopes of providing suggestions to the government on the course of action for change. The use of SNS fosters two-way communication between the government and citizens in an unprecedented manner in that it allows individuals to directly respond to policy changes or issues of national relevance. Traditional barriers to direct communication with government, such

as media interference or lack of access, while they still exist, are made less apparent through the use of SNS.

Political communication transferred through SNS is different than traditional media messages. It allows for the government to act more transparently in that citizens can answer back to announcements, or simply just express their own ideas. The fact that the comments and questions left on the message board are unfiltered and unedited allows users to see how fellow citizens are responding to the issues, and creates more conversation on the given subject. Regardless of age, gender, political alignment, and geographic location, users can gather in the virtual world to collaborate with one another and communicate to the government the changes or policy suggestions they would like to see enacted. Political SNS fosters a triad of communication; user to government, government to user, and user to user.

One aspect of the government response that citizens express as needing improvement is related to commentary. On Facebook or YouTube, excluding the video hosted by YouTube which specifically asked for questions, users leave comments but often ask questions. The sample contains several complaints about the fact that in those specific situations, the questions posed are not answered. It is practically impossible for the government to answer the thousands of comments posted on the various SNS sites. YouTube in one day had approximately 14,000 questions. The sheer number of questions spanning a variety of topics and concerns would be impractical to attempt to answer since a lot of the issues are addressed through different media. The onus is on the citizens to actively pursue the answers to their questions through other means. In other words, Facebook, YouTube, the White House's official page, and other SNS hold the answers

collectively, but it is up to the user to identify the important questions and subsequent answers.

The literature review of Chapter 2 supports the findings of the study in relation to theories on communication with government. Hobbes' theory on the relationship between government and citizens is in line with the findings of the study in that users demonstrate their need for a proactive government interested in pursuing policies best for the people. Citizens expect certain protections afforded by the government, such as access to representation and a free and open government. James writes of citizen action through the channeling of passion to reach societal change. His teaching that war is the best force to discipline a community is translated to the current day state of national crises; the economy, the health care crisis, and war are the fueling force behind the active debate and collaboration of ideas online. Citizens are channeling their anxiety and frustration of the current state of affairs into a positive force that under the proper conditions, acts as the catalyst to achieving social change.

Arendt writes of plurality and the coming together of man to achieve social goals. She describes a world evolved from the tenets of the Greek polis that places action and speech in unison. Citizens taking part in political SNS encompass both speech and action in their participation in the online discussion. Habermas' public sphere theory shows the impact of citizens collaborating together in a public forum. The difference is that this public forum is taking place in a virtual world, albeit linked to reality. His validity claims uphold the standards of valid communication, in this case applied to the discourse between the government and citizens. Castells' theory on mass self-communication and social networks ties in with the function of political SNS in that users' combined

individual efforts work in synch to bring about a desired outcome. Arendt's theory of collective action coupled with Habermas' and Castells' writings on the directives of communication demonstrate the ability for social change to come about as a result of the driving, collective voice of citizens demanding results.

Within the sample exists two types of social change activists; those who express the desire for change through making comments and communicating with one another on ideas, and those who are proactive in searching for methods of collaboration with one another to achieve goals. Whereas the former comprises individuals who show desire for change through expression by agreeing or disagreeing with each other or the government, the latter take on a more practical and active role in searching for answers to the nation's problems. For example, one user comments, "Why is there not a program where people of the United States...help pay on the federal deficit? A program where we can pay on our taxes money to help our own government. If...the people of the United States can give to help Haiti, Why can't we help our own government?"(UserS32). The difference in the two types of users rests in their unstated roles in searching for answers to assisting in the crisis. Those who are less involved but show interest in the issues are armchair activists, a popularly-coined term used to denote those who demonstrate concern for issues of national importance, but do little in terms of offering answers or concrete methods of support. They will join groups or message boards online and perhaps exchange ideas with one another, but the extent of the participation ends when they log off the computer. Others who take on a more active role do so by encouraging others to vote, write their representatives, attend political rallies, and volunteer in their

communities, among many other possibilities. These individuals are actively seeking ways to achieve change even after they log off the SNS.

Activists can use SNS to bring about social change through three methods; expression between individuals, government petitioning, and purposeful networking. The first type of social change is rudimentary to communication in that it follows the basic form of person to person communication; a message is conveyed between two parties. For example, a person on a message board may express their opinion on a government announcement, such as what he or she thought about the State of the Union Address, and the next person to comment on the thread may agree or disagree with the previous individual's opinion. A dialogue is started, and although no one is trying to change anything, an exchange of ideas takes place, which leads to enhanced and deeper communication and understanding of the issues. Such an exchange fulfills the initial purpose of social networking, to meet others and express ideas.

Government petitioning is referred to in this context as when individuals comment directly to the government. The Obama Administration has demonstrated interest in opening the lines of communication with citizens through directly asking for questions and comments regarding policy and current affairs. The questions are gathered and answered by the president. Users have a chance to ask whatever questions they deem as the most relevant to their lives. Others are free to view and comment on these questions, or add to them. This specific type of government petitioning is not the conventional sense of signing a petition and sending it in to a representative in hopes of having the stipulated goal signed into law. It refers to the direct communication of any individual citizen to the government, the Obama Administration in the case of the study. Direct communication

with the government is beneficial since one can state their exact opinion without the input of others and bypass a third party barrier.

Finally, the third method of social change activism is the most aggressive and involved. Purposeful networking connects users who seek to achieve common goals by gaining strength through numbers. The members of social sites can virtually meet others with similar goals and use the site as a host for not only exchanging ideas, but also making plans. The plans can range from organizing a protest to passing along a petition for submission to a local or state representative. The possibilities are essentially limitless since geographic separation is not a hindrance to pushing social change ideals. Activists use the chosen SNS, or even multiple sites, as a hosting ground. They make announcements on live events and even help organize political demonstrations. They assist other users in finding websites or clubs that promote specific goals or ideas.

The sample contains fewer of the purposeful networking activists. The most popular type of activist is the first type who uses SNS as an outlet for expression. Users state their opinions and criticize or praise one another and the government, and the social media examined in the study were used as a ground for exchanging opinions. Government petitioning was also heavily employed, although not quite as frequent as the former. Purposeful networking was not as apparent as initially expected since the majority of the people join used the SNS to exchange ideas or ask the government questions. Furthermore, purposeful networking may have been used via private messaging among users, which makes it unavailable for anyone outside of the correspondence to see. Few in the sample actually offer concrete advice on where to find online resources, like petitions and government websites. The majority were more

interested in expressing their opinion and debating other users. Furthermore, pages on Facebook that fall into the purposeful networking category do exist, but since the research question centers on other issues, those pages were not included in the sample.

Despite the massive potential for change through the online world, SNS is only a tool in citizens' grassroots endeavors. As the literature review maintains, change can only occur as a result of the direct and involved participation of those who are concerned by the change or those who will be affected by it. Asking questions and posting comments on Facebook is not enough to bring about change. Participants in political SNS recognize this when they encourage others to be the change they want to see in their communities. Participation should include volunteering in local organizations and having a sense of belonging to the community. Doing so encourages a sense of belonging, and as previously mentioned, change can occur when those who are affected the most care enough to initiate that change and be active contributors to the finding of solutions. The level of participation that is needed in today's society to bring about change surpasses the usual level of involvement, such as voting for a congressman or president. It must extend beyond that. In order for real change to occur, citizens need to actively voice their opinions and initiate change from within their own communities. Relying on the government to not only understand but fix the problems of society does not uphold the tenets of democracy and is not in the best interest of citizens. The needs of the people are best represented when it is the people who are voicing their needs.

The findings of the study lend important information to achieving collective societal goals through online social media networks. Knowing how Americans conceptualize issues and understand the current state of affairs provides the government

with enhanced abilities to deliver on what the people want and need. Traditional survey polls fail to capture to the same extent how the American people are talking about issues. Users in the online forum set the agenda for what is said and how it is being discussed. The energy and passion they display in being politically active can, if properly channeled, be the driving force for communicating with government in hopes of achieving social change.

While the efforts of the Obama Administration in broadening its communication strategy are unprecedented due to its innovative use of the online realm, bringing about social change requires more than the tools used to do so. SNS is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Accordingly, greater attention to local communities is needed to bring about social change. The federal government is limited in its ability to reach all Americans. Effective change in any organization, whether it is a business or otherwise, is accomplished best through grassroots since those who are the most affected by the change are more likely to contribute to finding solutions (Kanter, 1983). The Obama Administration, due to its limited ability to reach all Americans despite the innovation of social media, should encourage states and local governments to utilize SNS to a similar, if not the same, degree. Membership to social media is free, allowing both government and citizens to benefit from the pervasive reach of the tool. Additionally, as the literature review suggests, citizens may be more interested in issues that have a direct effect on their localities rather than one of national relevance. Congressmen and governors could host online question and answer sessions for their constituents and have a more active presence in the online scene.

The White House's use of Facebook and YouTube, while harnessing the ability to communicate across the political spectrum, may in fact be reaching less people due to its current inseparable political affiliation with the Democratic Party. Pollard, Chesebro and Studinski (2009) find that political websites can create ideological unity. Since the administration is headed by Obama, who is a Democrat, some citizens may feel alienated on the social medium. The White House could create a separate page that has a wall only for suggestions. It should not play host to political debate, post comments made by the president or any political figure, or contain any media, such as pictures or videos, suggestive of political affiliation. Doing so could afford citizens the opportunity to voice their opinion without the suggestive influence that is innate to political SNS, while simultaneously fulfill a main purpose of fostering debate among other users.

The most proactive initiative that the government could take to ensure social change is to listen to the collective voice of the people. While it is unknown how often White House staffers read the comments produced or convey them to the appropriate channel, SNS provide a rich body of insight to the general discussion of the nation. Collecting these comments and transmitting them to the appropriate government agencies can not only enhance two-way communication, but also can provide answers to solving the nation's problems. This is not to imply that the people alone hold the answer to the ongoing various crises; it merely suggests that innovative ideas can be deciphered as a product of collaboration of the masses. The government, if it is at all interested as it claims in expanding communication and reach among citizens, should acknowledge the ideas expressed online and take into account what users are saying and how they are conceptualizing issues of national importance.

The following chapter, conclusion, begins with a comprehensive synopsis of the most significant findings of the study while presenting central conclusions. A summary of the thesis then discusses the main theories presented in the literature review. It summarizes the theoretical framework and provides a synthesis of theories as applied to the findings of the study. An overview of the methodology is also presented. Chapter 5 then discusses the limitations and implications of the study in addition to addressing areas of future research.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Significant Findings

The thesis seeks to investigate ways in which citizens engaging in online social media sties conceptualize the three main issues of the national crisis—economy, health care, and war—in an effort to bring about social change through grassroots efforts. It also endeavors to decipher the government response to citizens’ use of social media and suggest ways in which social change can come about through increased government communication via accountability and transparency. The thesis answers important research questions regarding the sentiments and ideologies that Americans in the online community express regarding the direction the nation is headed under the Obama Administration.

Among the primary findings of the study, Americans desire change on both a vertical level with government and horizontal level with citizens. Users express that political parties should be more willing to work together from the top down; the Democrats who hold the majority in congress and the president should work with Republicans and vice versa to pass important legislation, such as health care and an exit strategy from the War on Terror, that is vital to the prosperity of the nation and well-being of citizens. On a horizontal level, users convey the desire for increased citizen participation in both the community, such as volunteering, and politics, such as voicing

political opinions through the available channels. Many users express that voting was an insufficient way to participate politically; more needs to be done on an individual level.

An additional yet related finding of the study shows that the topics of conversation surrounding change take various stances on the most effective methods of enacting change. Different ideas are expressed, and while the means to change for some people may vary, the end goal is the same; to bring about social change in the United States in hopes of bettering the state of the union and finding methods of coping with the three current crises. The two most widely suggested methods to change are engaging in public debate, whether through online forums such as SNS or contacting one's representative, and through volunteering in one's local community. Users are proactive in encouraging one another to attend political events and write their representatives. The main message, regardless of the specific direction, is that greater participation must be reached on a national level in order for social change to come to fruition.

Americans want change not just in the conventional sense of societal improvement, but also in the method through which government and citizens interact. As technology advances, so does the demand of increased communication with government. This includes rapid communication with increased accountability and a desire for more answers as to what the administration is doing. Citizens also express the desire to have their comments and suggestions heard and acknowledged. A significant amount of comments thanked either the president or the specific social network site for the technology that allowed the communication to take place, especially the live streaming of the State of the Union Address and the question and answer session hosted by YouTube. This gives credibility to the claim that citizens want more open and transparent lines of

communication, and as technology advances, are growing increasingly comfortable with and tolerant of new media communication tools.

Another finding of the study reflects the general attitudes pervading the national conversation in that while Americans are fearful, they are also hopeful. The sentiment of Americans still echoes fear of the future and uncertainty of the days ahead given the fact that the nation is in a crisis on a multitude of levels. Americans still feel the effects from the financial collapse. Unemployment rates continue to increase. Millions of Americans are uninsured. The War in Afghanistan costs billions of taxpayer dollars, but more significantly, claims the lives of American soldiers. The notion of crisis is still very much present and relevant in the conversation and mood of the nation and reflects in the concerns of users in the online community. Americans need reassurance and encouragement, but also know that in order to enact change, an effort from the bottom is the propelling force in reaching the top. The change that Obama preached during his campaign will not come to full fruition until Americans become actively engaged in the debate. Although not every single user said this on the wall or forums or reflected this in their questions on the YouTube video, the fact that they are participating and voicing their opinions demonstrates the belief in change emanating from the collective voice of the people.

Another finding is in regards to the War on Terror. The term “War on Terror” is used to describe the conflicts in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The sample showed, however, that when discussing the war, nearly all comments centered on Afghanistan rather than Iraq. This is interesting since the conflict in Iraq dates back to the 1990s, and therefore, has been more apparent in the public eye, spanning now four presidents (Presidents Bush

Senior, Clinton, Bush Junior, and Obama). Users showed more concern over the state of war and the soldiers in Afghanistan than they did the conflict and troops in Iraq.

The thesis also identifies an unexpected finding in that three types of activism in the online community are deciphered. Expression among individuals is the most common form of activity in the sample. Politically minded users voluntarily expressed their views to one another, commented on current events, and criticized each others' ideas and opinions. These users are perhaps the most common due to the convenience of logging on to a SNS and the simplicity of posting a comment. Users are plausibly more apt to participating politically via message boards on various social media due to the allowance of anonymity and wide-reach of individuals with no concrete social consequences. Expression among individuals is conducive to social change because it promotes ideas and encourages debate and criticism of government. It also espouses Habermas' public sphere theory, with the only difference taking place in the virtual world rather than in cafes and public streets as the philosopher once envisioned.

Government petitioning is found to be the next most common use of SNS. Users are able to freely express their views to the Obama Administration at an unprecedented level of speed and access due to the innovation of social media. Not only did users express their opinions to one another, they also used the site for generating suggestions for the administration. While there is no concrete evidence that the president or his staff implement the expressed ideas, the fact that the option is available for people to communicate directly with the administration suggests a broader goal of an increase in transparency and access to the executive office.

Purposeful networking was the initial intention of most SNS in their origin, but the sample finds that few users actually used Facebook or YouTube to designate meeting times or organize democratic activity. This may be due to the fact that organization of the masses for protests or petitions most likely occurs on their own event pages and not on ones of national reach. For example, the TEA Party, which stands for (Taxed Enough Already) and is also symbolic of the Boston Tea Party of the American Revolution in the 18th Century, uses its Facebook page to stage protests nationally and as a forum for expression among participants. The TEA Party's use of social media fulfills purposeful networking, but in this instance of communicating with the government is not pervasive throughout the sample.

Users online also express their desire for increased bipartisanship. Another major finding of the study shows that Americans are impatient with the political bickering in Washington, and aside from rallying politicians to enact desired social changes, they are urging their representatives to compromise and work together in order to pass essential legislation that will rectify the damage of the three main crises. Comments in the sample suggest that Americans are more eager for change to come about in the political system and are more willing to wait for the desired social changes to occur so long as they witness politicians working together to end political bickering and pass important legislation.

On concrete issues of the crisis, Americans are in agreement that something must be done, although reaching a uniform consensus on the right course of action is a contributing factor to the slow progress of change. As discussed in Chapter 3, methodology, the term crisis is applied to the financial, health care reform, and the War

on Terror. The presented topics are the most discussed and seem to be the issues of greatest importance in Washington according to the perceptions of the online community. A pervasive sense of urgency sets the mood for subjects of discussion online. Users are quick to criticize not only one another's ideas, but also those who complain yet do not do anything proactive to combat the problems that the American people face. The notion of armchair activism, which describes people who will post online and complain or criticize the Obama Administration but not offer any alternative solutions comprise the group of people that, according to the ideas expressed in the sample, are part of the problem since they are not involved in contributing to a solution.

The findings of the research are significant for several reasons. Firstly, it describes not only the topics of conversation, but also the sentiments behind the words. Qualitative content analysis is the most comprehensive method of deciphering the deep meaning behind the words, arguments, and questions that are presented in the online forum, confirmed by the literature review and significant findings of the thesis. Drawing links between the conversations of the sample allows for the identification of issues that Americans deem as the most important. Discovery of the issues increases their salience, and government could benefit from the findings in determining the concerns that are most important to the nation. Users' thoughts, feelings, and sentiments are candidly expressed. Since SNS exist for the intended purpose of connecting people and allowing them to express their ideas, users are more apt to not holding back in speaking their minds. The online environment is impersonal, and anyone can say exactly what they want without fear of retribution or judgment. Conventional and invasive research methods, such as surveying or asking open-ended questions may not yield the same honest and candid

answers. Furthermore, the methodology contributes to knowledge since it is unique in its use of purposive, quota, and sequential sampling techniques for content analysis. The use of three different sampling methods also contributes to the integrity of the study.

The notion of social change holds a variety of meanings for different Americans. Some view social change as a tangible sentiment manifesting itself in the passage of legislation to fix the health care system or end the war. These thinkers offer solutions based on practical principles of modern day democracy, such as participating in campaigns or rallies, being politically active and voting, or simply volunteering in the local community to assist in the areas where government cannot reach. Others think of social change in more abstract terms citing the need for an end to political “bickering”. Regardless of the meaning given to social change, Americans in the online community are growing increasingly proactive in suggesting changes for their nation, evident not only in their active commentary, but also by the mere fact that they are participating in the debate. SNS offer a unique and pervasive way to reach not only the government, but also one another, in an effort to collaborate on ideas of how to enact social change and effectively petition the government to bring about the desired goals to end the crisis. The government is also maintaining its stance of transparency and increased communication by hosting discussions and calling for user-generated questions. According to Arendt, communication and action are tantamount to one another, and must coexist as the first step in bringing about social change. Since the nation has an active body of citizens eager to talk and a government just as willing to listen, social change has a true chance of coming to fruition.

Thesis Summary

The thesis begins with a discussion of the three main issues of national crisis, the economy, health care, and War on Terror, as understood by American citizens participating in social network sites. It demonstrates the convergence of conversation between the government and the people and shows that it is taking place through new media, two of the most popular being Facebook and YouTube. Facebook appeals to both younger and older generations of voters who are interested in being politically active beyond casting their ballots. YouTube is also a viable social media tool due to its interactive platform and ability for videos and messages to go viral. Through the findings, the thesis contributes to the growing academic literature on uses for social media as it describes how social networks can be constructively used to delineate public conceptualization of issues during times of crisis and contribute to a social change via accessible and transparent lines of communication between the government and citizens.

The literature review begins with a discussion on the government's responsibility in society and citizens' rights by looking at Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651), which demonstrates that without a social contract, man is in a perpetual state of war. Looking at *Leviathan* provides a context through which to view the government's role of carrying out the rights of citizens and affording protection to civil society. William James' (1910) theory on channeling the passion of society for social change in addition to Hannah Arendt's (1958) theory on collective action and pluralism combine to provide the theoretical framework to social change in society. Furthermore, Jürgen Habermas' (1976) validity claims of undistorted communication and (1989) public sphere theory are compared to the online public sphere, in addition to Manuel Castells' (1996) network and

(2007) mass self-communication theories are applied to the conduct of both government and citizens in engaging in debate and carrying out communication in the online world. Finally, the history of social networks and contributions are discussed in order to provide a solid background and understanding of the context.

In summary, Hobbes' *Leviathan* brings to the thesis the notion of government accountability to citizens. James' work, *The Moral Equivalent of War*, is especially applicable to times of national crisis, much like the current state of affairs in the U.S., in that it maintains that societal passion during times of war (or crisis) is at its most pivotal and escalated point. People want action and are willing to take the necessary steps when the most is at stake. Change can be affected through democratic participation, or citizen action, which is at the core of Arendt's thesis. The current crises in the U.S. present an ideal situation for change to come to fruition. Drawing on Hobbes' assertions that government is accountable to citizens, and vice versa, the three authors' theories can be understood in conjunction with one another to show that citizens should channel their concerns and demands for societal improvement to the government, which is obliged to obey.

In contemporary society, new media is an increasingly present and collective voice for the masses. Habermas' theory of undistorted communication provides the background through which effective exchange of ideas between two parties, in this case the government and citizens, can be understood. His public sphere theory lends itself to the efficiency in communicating in an open forum and is applicable to new media tools. Castell's network and mass self-communication theories provide a basis through which social media networks can be conceptualized and understood on a theoretical level. Social

media networks such as the ones examined in the thesis are vital to merging the populace and reaching the government, thereby providing a tool through which voices can be heard and change be affected on a national level. The various authors selected approach the topic of communication via social networks through differing schools of thought, which provides a rich and varied theoretical background for understanding and accomplishing the thesis' aim.

Content analysis of the comments and questions left on the White House's Facebook and YouTube pages during the day before, on, and after the 2010 State of the Union Address is chosen as the method of study since content analysis is the most effective method of examining the sentiments and issues that citizens are expressing, in addition to understanding how they conceptualize the issues of crises. Those specific days are selected due to the fact that they fall near the one year anniversary of President Obama's inauguration and also because the two selected online social media sites saw increased activity during that time allowing for a larger, more inclusive sample. Content analysis through the unique blend of purposive, quota, and sequential sampling of the comments captures the sentiments that the user had at the moment of posting, oftentimes raw and emotionally-charged, allowing for the unfiltered opinions and concerns of citizens to be expressed and then recorded in an unobtrusive manner. Reliability and validity are upheld through consistency in data collection and authenticity of the responses of social media participants. It also allows for insight into the government response to citizens' conceptualization of issues and demands for change and more transparent communication.

The thesis draws upon the theories identified in the theoretical framework of the study. As previously mentioned, the purpose in using the selected scholars was to gather specific threads of knowledge that in conjunction with one another, provide a sound and collaborative theoretical model to guide the thesis. The model of communication between government and citizens via the online forum is upheld by Habermas' validity claims and public sphere theory and is enhanced by Castells' network and mass self-communication theories. Drawing on James' theory on collaboration of passion among members of society, and furthered by Arendt's claim of speech and action working in unison to promote social change, the thesis maintains that social change can come about through grassroots efforts among the populace. Consequently, the findings of the study are significant because they are backed theoretically.

Limitations and Implications

The online community has seen a rapid growth in the last decade, however, Internet access is not universal in the United States and not all can afford to own a computer or pay a monthly connection fee. Some populations, mostly those living in rural or remote areas, must rely on slow dial-up connections, and therefore are not able to participate in forums with a high volume of activity, such as Facebook, or watch and comment on online streaming video, such as the presidential interview hosted by YouTube. These barriers eliminate certain populations from being counted in the sample.

Age is an additional factor. The majority of the users belonging to social network sites are younger, technologically savvy individuals. According to Facebook, the demographics with the highest increase in usage are middle-aged individuals. Elderly

people, who have lived through more crises than the average American (Great Depression, World War Two, etc.), may have unique perspectives and recommendations for subsequent generations. Their expertise and outlook could benefit the community, and the fact that not all of them participate in the online discussion discounts them from the sample. On the other hand, the goal of the research is to measure what Americans are saying in the online world. Including their opinions through survey research, for example, does not further the intended measure of the research questions since the study seeks to evaluate how perceptions are held online.

Another limitation of the study relates to nationality of the users. The sample found commentary from users who identified themselves as citizens of other nations. The issues that the United States faces were still important to them, even though they did not reside in the country. While their comments were in line with the questions and criticisms raised by others, there is no way of ensuring that any user on the forum lives in the United States, let alone has voting privileges. Although the study does not seek to measure the opinions and sentiments of Americans as a whole, it does investigate the way Americans on political SNS conceptualized ideas and held discourse over those topics. It is safe to assume that most of the users were in fact American since the issues seemed so important to them, however, it is not a measurable and quantifiable fact.

The communication tool of the online forum plays host to a variety of opinions and debates that allows users to bypass methods of traditional communication with their representatives. The Obama Administration recently announced a new communication strategy that relies less on the media as a middle man and more on online social network sites. The heavy reliance on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other sites allows for more

communication with less interception. Perhaps because the younger generation of voters has grown up with these social network tools, they will be more comfortable with contacting their representatives on all levels of government, local, state, and federal, and as a result, will be more likely to vote. An area of future research could examine the sense of voter self-efficacy and examine if a correlation exists between SNS political usage and voter turn-out.

Another area of valuable future research would examine the relationship among users in a forum. All of the conversations in the sample saw serious debates of issues take place where users began taking other comments personally. While a main point of the forums was for constructive criticism of the policies of the Obama Administration, users often resorted to criticizing one another for holding certain views. The conversations at times grew vulgar and profane language seeped in to the commentary. Posters have verbally attacked one another causing a “virtual fight”. While many of the arguments presented were sound and relevant, the reason behind the argument could be studied. Research questions could look at why people take politics in the online forum so personally, even when they are not being directly criticized; why people feel emotionally connected to certain issues; how people respond online when their issues of sensitivity are demeaned or not viewed as important; and why people grow irate with one another even in peaceful, non-threatening discussions.

E-government also benefits from the study because new areas of research are identified. As mentioned in the literature review, e-government is growing to be a viable method of lessening the burden on states’ budgets and increasing citizens’ use of government services. Future research could examine how constituent concerns can be

addressed using SNS. It could measure constituent satisfaction and comfort levels in communicating with their representatives in an online forum, which reflects more on the style of a conversation rather than a formal and increasingly out-dated process of letter-writing. Since SNS are mostly free of charge, representatives could host personal pages that could answer commonly asked questions and receive feedback on their progress from their constituents. A future study could examine the effectiveness of this method.

An additional study could concentrate on other uses of political SNS. Researchers could look at how SNS are used in the mobilization of individuals. The study could contrast the various uses of political SNS. For example, do people use SNS as an outlet for expressing a political view, or is it used effectively to mobilize individuals to some action, such as a political protest or petition? This study would also pave the way for a second study in looking at the demographics behind the usage of SNS for political purposes. While obtaining a concrete numeric sample of the number of men and women and their ages, it would be useful in knowing which populations participate the least in political SNS. Knowing which groups are excluded could give researchers clues as to how include hidden or underrepresented populations.

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