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Inter-organizational digital divide: Civic groups' media strategies in the Trinity River Corridor Project

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Abstract

This study investigates how leaders of civic groups make decisions about using new and social media versus older forms of media. Drawing from theory and empirical research on the social effects of new media, we focus on whether new media is used in a way that lowers barriers to ordinary citizens' participation in local politics, or else contributes to a "digital divide" between elite and non-elite civic groups. To explore these issues, we conducted interviews with leaders of eight civic groups involved in the Trinity River Corridor development project in Dallas, Texas. We also interviewed local journalists, and analyzed the eight civic groups' Web sites, social media sites, and blogs, as well as blogs that linked to the groups' sites. We find that new and social media were used mainly by organizations that were not directly involved in major political actions, and that for the two groups most directly involved in political actions, the wealthier and more powerful group was better connected to other organizations that did use new and social media. The findings reveal a sharp digital divide between networks of civic organizations.

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1. Introduction

While a number of studies have explored the effects of the Internet on citizens' participation in political organizations (*e.g.*, Hara, 2008; Hara and Estrada, 2005), little research has been done on civic groups' strategic decisions regarding the Internet and new media. Instead, most research on the effects of the Internet on participatory politics uses surveys to investigate the effects of levels of ICT use on individuals' decisions to join civic groups or engage in protest actions.

Several early survey-based studies found that the Internet had an individualizing effect on users that led to decreased participation in politics (*e.g.*, Stoll, 1995; Turkle, 1996; Kraut, *et al.*, 1998; Nie and Erbring, 2000; Dahlgren, 2001; Diani, 2000; Ward, *et al.*, 2003), while other research found that the Internet facilitated participation in politics by providing users with knowledge about local and national issues (Shah, *et al.*, 2001; Johnson and Kaye, 2003; Weber, *et al.*, 2003; Wojcieszak, 2009). While survey-based studies have produced valuable insights, by focusing on individuals at the expense of organizations, the literature on ICTs and civic activism has missed important aspects of the interplay of information technology and local politics. Studies that have investigated how ICTs affect citizens' likelihood of participating in existing civic organizations have implicitly treated civic organizations as though they were themselves untouched by new communications technology and new media such as blogs and social media. Yet it is clear that ICTs have led to major changes within civic organizations themselves. Diani (2000) has summarized the effects of ICTs on such organizations in terms of their effects on organizations that mobilize mainly 'professional' versus 'participatory resources,' and on transnational organizations. Other research shows that ICTs have altered civic groups' organizational tactics, including recruitment tactics [1] and interorganizational networking (Ayres, 1999; Cleaver, 1998; Scott and Street, 2000; Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2002). ICTs can help civic groups to build a collective identity [2], reinforce existing social networks, and contribute to a sense of community (Brainard and Siplon, 2000; Elin, 2003; Norris, 2004; Oostveen, 2010). Other studies have expanded on Diani's (2000) analysis of how ICTs can expand the transnational reach of social movements (Castells, 1996; Cleaver, 1998; Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2002; Cordoso and Neto, 2004; Russell, 2005; Hwang, *et al.*, 2006).

This study focuses on *local* civic groups, and asks how leaders of such groups make decisions about ICTs and new media. Specifically, because ICTs can potentially lower barriers to participation and build collective identity and a sense of community, we ask why some civic groups may choose to use some ICTs but not others, why they may choose not to use ICTs at all, and why they may invest scarce resources in ICTs rather than in other forms of political communication. Our study is guided by two theoretical questions. The first is whether new media

tends to lower social barriers to citizens' participation in local politics. The second is whether new media reinforces preexisting social barriers restricting non-elites' participation in local politics. In what follows we review both the *lowered barriers thesis* and the *reinforcement (or digital divide) thesis*, as well as empirical studies of ICTs and civic groups that address these theses. Our reading of the literature suggest a need for comparative studies (Hara and Jo, 2007) of fields (Van Laer, 2010) or networks (Diani, 2000, 2002) of civic organizations, and our empirical analysis is of a field of civic organizations in Dallas, Texas, working on both sides (for and against) of a proposition to prevent a toll road from being built through a park area within the Trinity River Corridor Project (TRCP) near downtown Dallas. Our methodology, discussed below, is qualitative comparative organizational analysis (Curtis and Zurcher, 1973; Evans, 1997; Zhao, 1998; Bartley, 2007). Our main findings are that ICTs, including social media, were used mainly by groups that were not directly involved in major political actions, and that despite the democratizing potential of the Internet, a sharp digital divide existed at the organizational field level between wealthy and well-connected civic groups that mobilized mainly professional resources, and those with less financial and social capital that mobilized mainly participatory resources (Diani, 2000).

2. Theory

Early scholarship on the political implications of the Internet was generally optimistic about its potential to increase political participation in a democratic society (Resnick, 1997; Alexander, 1999; Tambini, 1999; *cf.*, Brants, *et al.*, 1996; Streck, 1998; Bimber, 2001). Some empirical studies of civic organizations are supportive of this early optimism, although more recent research tends to be more skeptical.

2.1. Lowered barriers

Since the 1990s scholars have extolled the power of information technology to lower financial and organizational barriers to democratic participation (Dertouzos, 1991; Bertelson, 1992; Rheingold, 1993; Castells, 1996; Ess, 1996; Poster, 1997; Bimber, 1998; Jones, 1998; Kellner, 1999; Klein, 1999; Tambini, 1999; Slevin, 2000; Shah, *et al.*, 2001; Tolbert and McNeal, 2003; Byerly, 2005; Kobayashi, *et al.*, 2006). ICTs and new media are thought to encourage democratic participation because of their ability to liberate citizens from restrictions inherent in traditional mass media (Rucht, 2004). Where newspapers, television, and radio tend to frame the news in ways that favor established institutions and figures of authority (Gitlin, 1980; Ryan, 1991), ICTs and new media create opportunities for social movements and civic groups to bypass the distorting filter of the mass media (Myers, 2000; Scott and Street, 2000; Garrett, 2006).

The Internet has expanded the repertoires of contention [3] available to social movements and civic groups (Preece, 2000; Scott and Street, 2000; Couldry and Curran, 2003; Hwang, *et al.*, 2006). These groups now avail themselves of a “digitalized” social movement repertoire’ [4].

For example, new media and ICTs also allow citizens' groups to organize across vast geographical distances and in real time. This can be seen most strikingly in studies of global and transnational movements, in which ICTs have lowered many geographical, temporal, and financial barriers to doing transnational projects (*e.g.*, Castells, 1996; Cleaver, 1998; Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2002; Cordoso and Neto, 2004; Russell, 2005; Hwang, *et al.*, 2006). Civic groups are also able to pool 'microcontributions' (Garrett, 2006) so as to compete for influence with wealthy and powerful individuals and organizations. To summarize, ICTs appear to have the potential to alter the flow of political information, to reduce the costs of conventional forms of political participation, to create new forms of participation, and ultimately to contribute to a democratization of participation in politics (Leizerov, 2000).

2.2. Organizational reinforcement

While the Internet may potentially democratize participation in politics, in practice it may also be used in ways that reinforce barriers to participation [5]. In one early survey of the literature, Streck (1998) reviewed numerous studies that showed online citizens to be disproportionately highly educated, young, well-paid, and male (*e.g.*, Brants, *et al.*, 1996; Franzen, 2000; Benson, 2009). Brants, *et al.* (1996) concluded that the profile of Internet users in Amsterdam supports the existing socioeconomic structure of elite dominance, while Klein (1999) pointed out that Internet communication requires money for equipment and monthly fees, as well as skills in text-based communication (see Hargittai, 2008; Hargittai and Walejko, 2008). This inequality in Internet skills and use may exacerbate class differences in political participation levels rather than ameliorate them.

While ICTs and new media have been shown to lower barriers to participation in transnational social movements, there have been relatively few studies of ICT use within more traditional local movements. And there is almost no research that compares ICT use across different organizations within a local organizational field or inter-organizational network, or that examines how leaders of social movements and civic organizations make decisions about investing resources in ICTs and new media versus in old media or in non-media strategies. Without such research, it is difficult to put ICTs and new media in context — to determine where, how, and why they influence democratic participation. Below we examine these issues through a case study of a public debate surrounding the Trinity River Corridor Project, a major public works project in downtown Dallas, Texas.

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3. Background: The Trinity River Corridor Project

Depending on whom you ask, the project is either Dallas' opportunity to reinvent itself as a 'world-class city' or an example of the city's weakness for business-driven policy and political bickering. Or both. (Dille, 2009)

The Trinity River Corridor Project (TRCP, <http://www.trinityrivercorridor.com/>) is a public works project located just west of downtown Dallas, Texas. The TRCP was first brought to the attention of Dallas residents in the late 1990s, and construction began in the early 2000s. With the goal of redeveloping a large section of the Trinity River, the project proposes to create sports fields, recreational areas, lakes, parks, and hiking and biking trails along the river's path, as well as an equestrian center and the Trinity River Audubon Center (<http://www.trinityriveraudobon.org/>), which opened in 2008. The stated goals of the Project are to increase flood protection of downtown Dallas, encourage economic development (particularly in the city's poorer southern sectors), and improve traffic flow between northern and southern sectors.

Figure 1: Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge, Trinity River Project, Dallas.

In May 1998 the Trinity River Corridor Project Bond passed, allowing the master planning of the Project to begin. At this time Laura Miller, a former Dallas Mayor, wished to redesign the Project, as she believed that in its proposed form it was geared toward roads and highways at the expense of recreational areas and nature. With the assistance of Dallas philanthropist Dr. Gail Thomas (Dille, 2009), Miller was able to hire a team of urban designers to create the *Balanced vision plan* (http://www.trinityrivercorridor.com/html/vision_plan.html). Though the roadway

connecting the northern and southern sectors of the city remained, the *Balanced vision plan* included more landscaping and public art along the river.

Nine years later, on 6 November 2007, Dallas residents were asked to vote on a revision to the proposed 10-mile-long Trinity Parkway toll road. In 2006 newly elected city council member Angela Hunt, a former trial attorney and then-member of the City Council's Trinity River Corridor Project Committee, had argued that Laura Miller's vision of the Project, focused as it was on recreational areas and nature conservation, had been lost. Hunt brought to the public's attention the rising estimated cost of the Project and a revision of the original road design by the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers that sharply reduced proposed downtown park space. In spring 2007 Hunt proposed a referendum, Proposition One, that would have eliminated the proposed high-speed toll road and replaced it with a four-lane 35-MPH parkway. Proposition One's advocates argued that a high-speed toll road should not share space with recreational and protected nature areas within the boundaries of the Trinity River's earthen levee walls. Opponents of Proposition One contended that creating a new plan and rerouting the toll road would create unnecessary delays and costs. In the end, by a 47 to 53 percent vote, Proposition One failed, and construction of the toll road within the levees was allowed to proceed. After the referendum, newly elected Dallas Mayor Tom Leppert removed Angela Hunt from the City Council's TRCP Committee.

According to the Trinity Trust Web site, as of 2010 the TRCP has a budget of US\$2.2 billion. The Project is a vast undertaking for the city of Dallas: the City Council convenes every other week to discuss the Project, it is closely followed by local media, and numerous fundraisers have been held over the course of its development. But without question the most controversial aspect of the TRCP was the toll road (see Levinthal, 2007b). Consequently, in the run-up to the vote on Proposition One, many civic organizations engaged in public outreach to build support for their vision of the Project.

4. Analysis

4.1. Methods

To analyze tactical decisions made within civic organizations that were involved in the TRCP, we make use of qualitative methods borrowed from social movements research and organization studies (*e.g.*, Curtis and Zurcher 1973; Evans, 1997; Zhao, 1998; Bartley, 2007). These include several methods of comparative organizational analysis (analysis of fields or networks of organizations), including: 1) in-depth structured interviews with organizational leaders; 2) interviews with local newspaper reporters; 3) link tracking (Adar and Adamic, 2005) of hyperlinks from the blogosphere to civic groups' Web sites, and from each group's Web site to each other group's site; and, 4) analysis of financial information on the groups from publicly available tax returns. After identifying all of the major civic groups involved in the toll road

debate, we applied all four methods of analysis to the two main groups: TrinityVote and Vote No! Save the Trinity.

4.2. The pro– and anti–toll road groups

A number of local civic groups played critical roles in the run–up to the vote on Proposition One. The group that was most central in the effort to stop the proposed toll road within the levees was TrinityVote, while the organization that spearheaded opposition to Proposition One was Vote No! Save the Trinity (VNST). We first provide an overview of the media and non–media tactics used by each group based on our structured interviews with the groups’ leaders and analysis of Web pages and documents produced by and about each organization. Then we turn to the networks of civic and business organizations that supported TrinityVote and VNST during the run–up to Proposition One.

4.2.1. TrinityVote

TrinityVote, founded by Dallas lawyer and councilperson Angela Hunt, was a grassroots organization dedicated to building public support for the referendum that would have stopped the toll road. The group was funded through donations, most of which came in the form of small sums from local Dallasites, though there were a few large donors as well [6].

TrinityVote used very little new media. Angela Hunt ran the TrinityVote campaign with the help of friends and family, and the group’s Web site was designed and maintained by her husband. The group used the Internet for verification of signatures on their referendum (cross–referencing signatures with voter records), and for communicating with supporters about speaking engagements.

Although a political consultant was hired to handle communications and media, TrinityVote relied mainly on over 100 volunteers who worked at calling stations, handed out yard signs, and engaged in door–to–door campaigning. The group also relied on coverage by local newspapers, as well as billboards, brochures, and postcards (interview with Angela Hunt, 2 February 2010). They also used radio, having Angela Hunt give interviews on local radio talk shows. And TrinityVote produced two local television commercials that mimicked an Apple Computer commercial that was popular at the time. The group bought four billboard advertisements [7], and TrinityVote volunteers participated in phone banking when trying to get the 50,000 signatures needed to put Proposition One on the ballot.

According to a Google Blogs search, before the November 2007 vote on the proposition, approximately 300 blogs either mentioned TrinityVote or hyperlinked to the group’s home page. Blogs that linked to TrinityVote include the blogs of the Young Sierrans (an informal sub–group within the Dallas Sierra Club), Dallas Progress, Dallas Blog, Dallas South Blog, Dallas County Young Democrats, Unfair Park, Mystic Bagel, and Back Talk East Dallas and Back Talk Lake Highlands. A 28 September 2007 blog post by Mystic Bagel gives a sense of the tone of many of these blogs, almost all of which were opposed to the proposed toll road within the levees:

I ordered a yard sign from TrinityVote yesterday. I will

probably make a donation today to help them combat the misinformation in this flier. I'm excited about the potential for the grass roots of this city to deal a David vs. Goliath blow to all the politicians and the big money interests who want to pave our park. I really think it could happen.

Another post on Dallas Blog described public debates over the proposed toll road:

As I mentioned in that post, the crowd was more vocal on the Vote Yes! side. Angela Hunt and Sandy Greyson got the laughs and applause while Tom Leppert and Veletta Lill got laughed at and received little support from the audience. Hunt and Greyson also did a much better job of delivering their message.

After attending debates in different parts of the city, this has not changed. No matter who is speaking for Vote Yes! or Vote No!, the crowd support is clearly on the Vote Yes! side. TrinityVote has an all-star lineup of debaters while the opposition can't get one person to do a good job of selling this road. [8]

4.2.2. Vote No! Save the Trinity

Opposition to Proposition One was spearheaded by Vote No! Save the Trinity (VNST), a campaign organized by Dallas Mayor Tom Leppert and former Mayors Laura Miller and Ron Kirk. This group formed soon after a press conference held by Angela Hunt announcing TrinityVote's opposition to the toll road. The VNST campaign comprised both supporters of the Trinity River Corridor Project as a whole, and groups and individuals specifically interested in the toll road. Unlike TrinityVote, Vote No! Save the Trinity hired many external firms [9]. The list of donors to Vote No! Save the Trinity included mainly wealthy Dallasites and exclusive groups such as the Dallas Citizens Council [10]. Altogether, Vote No! Save the Trinity raised more than US\$559,000 in donations.

The editorial board of the *Dallas Morning News*, the region's major (and fairly conservative) daily newspaper generally supported Vote No! Save the Trinity's pro-toll road position.

Vote No! Save the Trinity (VNST) purchased television advertisements that cost about US\$200,000 to produce and broadcast (Levinthal, 2007c). They also purchased radio advertisements, and paid a local rap artist to write and record a song, which was aired on local radio stations, that informed people of the anti-toll road position as well as where and when to vote [11]. Mayor Tom Leppert recorded a series of radio messages as well. Vote No! Save the Trinity seldom used billboards, instead relying mostly on yard signs. VNST's political consultant Carol Reed estimated that the group 'posted over 14,000 yard signs' (interview with Carol Reed, 18 February 2010). Vote No! Save the Trinity also used direct mailings.

Vote No! Save the Trinity's Web site was designed and built by Randall White, president of Elettore, a local public relations and communications firm. VNST's home page linked to pages that directed people how to sign up, volunteer, obtain yard signs, and find information on the times and locations of the vote itself. In addition, there was a hyperlink to Save the Trinity's Web site [12]. Carol Reed claimed that "VNST had very few volunteers except those who were texting and doing the new media." Before the November 2007 vote on the proposition, six blogs mentioned Vote No! Save the Trinity or hyperlinked to the group's Web site (which was discontinued soon after the vote).

4.3. Organizational support networks

The organizational leadership of TrinityVote and VNST was not particularly well-versed in new media, and no one from either group claimed that new media was centrally important to their campaign. However, a large number of civic and business groups were allied with each campaign, and these groups made more extensive use of new media.

The groups supporting TrinityVote included the Dallas Sierra Club (DSC, <http://texas.sierraclub.org/dallas/>) and Texas Campaign for the Environment (TCE). The DSC focused on the proposed toll road's negative environmental impact, and posted information about Proposition One on its home page. On the site, the DSC provided information about where and when voting would take place, and urged the group's volunteers to encourage people to vote: 'It's important that when discussing the ordinance that you urge voters to vote *FOR* Proposition 1.' In addition to informing the public, the DSC donated US\$5,000 to Angela Hunt's campaign. The anti-toll road Dallas Sierra Club mailed postcards to members about their position with the message 'Guess where the toll road is now?' Underneath the headline was a recent picture of a flooded Trinity River corridor (Tomaso, *et al.*, 2007). The Dallas Sierra Club's Web site posted comments and information about the referendum as well as information on volunteer opportunities for TrinityVote. A hyperlink to TrinityVote's Web site was posted on the blog, as was a link to a page that provided details about the vote. Contact information for Brooks Love (the group's political consultant) was also posted. The Dallas Sierra Club, a group that made yard signs available for constituents to demonstrate their support, did not have Facebook or Twitter accounts to update followers about Proposition One. The three main purposes of TrinityVote's Web site were to provide a description of their position on the vote, a place to allow people to provide a signature to contribute to placing the referendum on the ballot, and a click-and-give section. According to Angela Hunt, TrinityVote 'launched a verification of the signatures on the referendum where a cross reference of voter records was done over the Internet. About 20,000 signatures were collected over the course of two months' (interview with second author, 2 February 2010). TrinityVote's Web site did not have hyperlinks to the television commercials posted on YouTube. Articles from the *Dallas Observer* were posted for followers to view.

Texas Campaign for the Environment (TCE, <http://www.texasenvironment.org/>), a non-profit organization dedicated to educating the public about state and local environmental issues, also supported TrinityVote. According to former field manager Branden Helms, while 'Texas Campaign for the Environment did not sponsor TrinityVote ... it instead piggy-backed with [TrinityVote's] petition drive' (interview with second author, 26 February 2010). When TCE's

volunteers went door-to-door to discuss local environmental issues they also informed the public about TrinityVote's position on Proposition One. They contributed during the early stages of the campaign by collecting signatures in order to have the referendum placed on the ballot. During the vote, approximately ten volunteers from Texas Campaign for the Environment camped outside of polling stations to promote TrinityVote's anti-toll road position on Proposition One. Texas Campaign for the Environment did not use old media at all, as their main role in the toll road campaign was to provide TrinityVote with manpower. Although Texas Campaign for the Environment had an active Web site, they did not post anything on their site about TrinityVote. And though Texas Campaign for the Environment has Facebook and Twitter accounts, these social media tactics were not used. A message board independently organized by TCE's Brendan Helms allowed people to post comments about the Project and sign up to volunteer for TrinityVote's campaign.

The major supporters of VNST included the Dallas Citizens Council (DCC), Trinity Trust Foundation (TTF), Trinity Commons Foundation (TCF), and Save the Trinity. The Dallas Citizens Council represents Dallas's most prominent businesses. The group donated US\$300,000, the largest single donation. The DCC is a coalition of CEOs from about 120 companies that focuses on five to seven major issues. These CEOs serve on City Council boards, lobby lawmakers, and engage in public relations campaigns. Dallas Citizens Council depended on mailed newsletters, rather than e-mail messages, to update members.

Another major group that supported VNST was the Trinity Trust Foundation (TTF, <http://www.thetrinitytrust.org/>). The TTF's main objective is to raise private funds for the Trinity River Corridor Project's various amenities, including a whitewater rafting course, ball fields, and pedestrian bridges. For example, the group received an anonymous US\$10 million donation to convert a bridge over Continental Avenue into a pedestrian-only bridge. Although the TTF did not donate to VNST, when the election results showed that VNST had prevailed, the TTF hosted an event to celebrate the victory (Levinthal, 2007e). Attendees included members of the Dallas Citizen's Council. Employees of the Trinity Trust Foundation independently posted TRCP-related information on Twitter, and the organization has a Facebook fan page as well as a LinkedIn account. TTF's Facebook page informs followers about events coming up related to the TRCP. The group's outreach coordinator Tierney Kaufman explained, 'I have just bought a Flip camcorder so that we can do small videos to put on the Web site and on YouTube' (interview with second author, 25 January 2010).

Another organization that contributed to the success of VNST's campaign was the Trinity Commons Foundation (TCF, <http://www.trinitycommonsfoundation.org/>), whose director was involved on several fronts. A non-profit grassroots organization, the TCF holds periodic public meetings to communicate with interested parties about the Trinity River Corridor Project. Unlike the Trinity Trust Foundation, the Trinity Commons Foundation took an official public position on Proposition One. The boards of both the TTF and TCF included individuals who supported the toll road, including the TCF's executive director Craig Holcomb, a former Dallas City Council member. The TCF organized a petition drive to oppose Proposition One that resulted in over US\$44,000 in political contributions to the Vote No! Save the Trinity campaign. The Trinity Commons Foundation engaged in intense lobbying of Dallas politicians regarding Proposition One. Leaders of the other groups would not comment on their lobbying activities.

Though the Trinity Common Foundation had a Web site, the TCF's Craig Holcomb explained that apart from the site, 'The Trinity Commons Foundation does not engage in new media tactics because they are targeting an older demographic who sits at their desk and checks the Web site just not anything else. There were salesmen who have tried to sell social networking programs,' but the TCF passed on the opportunity (interview with second author, 15 February 2010).

Craig Holcomb, executive director of the Trinity Commons Foundation, created another civic group to oppose Proposition One: Save the Trinity. Save the Trinity hired several firms over the course of the campaign, including a Webmaster who designed and maintained the organization's Web site. The Eppstein Group (<http://www.eppsteingroup.com/>) provided poll workers and consulting services for the anti-petition effort. These poll workers wore specially designed anti-Proposition One T-shirts. In addition, the public relations firm Rita Cox & Company was hired to provide communications and media assistance. In total, Save the Trinity collected over US\$140,000 in political contributions, including approximately US\$41,000 from the Dallas Citizens Council. One of the most notorious tactics reportedly used by supporters of the toll road was petition blocking. Save the Trinity, the organization created by Craig Holcomb for the express purpose of opposing Proposition One, hired petition blockers who stood outside polling places where Angela Hunt's organization was collecting signatures to persuade people not to sign (Tomaso and Blythe, 2007). Joshua Blankenship was hired to design and build Save the Trinity's Web site, whose main slogan was 'Sink the Petition, Save the Trinity.' This Web site included links to the *Balanced vision plan* Web site, to information about the Trinity Parkway, and to directions for supporting Save the Trinity.

Table 1: Finances, media tactics, and Web site hyperlinks of the main anti- and pro-toll road civic groups.		
	TrinityVote	Vote No! Save the Trinity
<i>Description</i>	Main anti-toll road group	Main pro-toll road group
<i>\$US raised</i>	\$103,651	\$472,074
<i>\$ spent</i>	\$64,840	\$150,000
<i>Outstanding loans</i>	\$96,600	0
<i>Old media</i>	Sought coverage from the <i>Dallas Observer</i> , local TV commercials, radio talk shows, phone banks, some yard signs	14,000+ yard signs, radio and television ads, direct mail
<i>No media</i>	Petition signature collection	

<i>New media</i>	Web site for signature collection and contributions	Web site, Facebook page Save the Trinity, Trinity Trust Foundation, <i>Balanced vision plan</i>
<i>Hyperlinks</i>	<i>Dallas Observer</i> articles	

Table 2: Finances, media tactics, and Web site hyperlinks of secondary civic groups.

Anti-toll road groups			Pro-toll road groups			
	Texas Campaign for the Environment	Dallas Sierra Club	Dallas Citizens Council	Trinity Trust Foundation	Trinity Commons Foundation	Save the Trinity
<i>Description</i>	Local environmental group	Local branch of a national environmental group	Elite civic group of CEOs of local companies	Local non-profit that raises funds for amenities for the TRCP	Local non-profit established to support the TRCP	Temporary organization established to fight Proposition One
<i>Old media</i>		Postcards, yard signs				
<i>No media</i>	Provided volunteers for canvassing		Lobbying		Lobbying	Petition blocking
<i>New media</i>			Web site	Web site, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn	Web site, Facebook	Web site
<i>Hyperlinks</i>	Web site	Web site posted voting information	<i>Dallas Morning News</i> articles	Trinity Commons Foundation, <i>Balanced vision plan</i>	Trinity Trust Foundation, <i>Balanced vision plan</i>	<i>Balanced vision plan</i>

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5. Discussion

In interviews, the leaders of TrinityVote and Vote No! Save the Trinity were generally ambivalent about new media's ability to help their organizations, and they had little personal new media experience or skill. They could not explain how they calculated costs and benefits of ICT use before making decisions about investing resources in them. Instead, in a phenomenon familiar to organizational sociologists (*e.g.*, Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), it appears that leaders of these organizations often engaged with new media in a ritualistic way, using it when they felt they were expected to, and because other organizations with close ties to their own were using it. But they did so without much explicit, rational calculation of new media's costs and benefits for their campaign.

If we compare the finances, supporters, and media strategies of the two groups ([Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#)), it appears that the use of new media by the less wealthy and less well-connected anti-toll road group (TrinityVote) was similar to that of the wealthier, pro-toll road organization (VNST). Based on this comparison, the lowered barriers thesis could be argued to be correct: microcontributions collected from large numbers of small contributors via the Internet allowed TrinityVote, the less powerful, more grassroots organization, to compete with the much better financed VNST campaign. Also, local bloggers were much more supportive of TrinityVote and the anti-toll road campaign than they were of VNST.

However, if instead of comparing the two main organizations we compare the two fields or networks of civic organizations that fought over Proposition One, the picture that emerges is strikingly consistent with Diani's (2000) contention that ICTs have the greatest potential to mobilize citizens "who act professionally on behalf of causes with vast resonance among the public ... and low radical potential" [[13](#)]. These are organizations with "an emphasis on professional structures" and a constituency that is dispersed and shares "similar broad views on a given set of related issues. In this case there is ... comparatively little need to develop strong identities — precisely because members do not need specific incentives to mobilize directly" [[14](#)]. Consistent with Diani's argument, in the case of the debate over Proposition One, new media was used by all the groups involved in the referendum, but it was used more by groups that did not spearhead the campaigns, such as the Dallas Sierra Club, the Trinity Trust Foundation, and Save the Trinity, and it was the wealthier, more powerful, and more conservative groups in the pro-toll road campaign that were more strongly linked through ICTs, financial arrangements, and social connections to a network of civic organizations and public relations firms that produced more social media, and more expensive, professionally produced new media, than did the smaller network of organizations that supported TrinityVote ([Table 2](#)). While there was not much of a digital divide between TrinityVote and VNST per se, there was a sharp digital divide between the two networks of civic organizations that mobilized mostly participatory resources (the anti-toll road campaign), and the network that mobilized mostly professional resources (the pro-toll road campaign). Thus although we cannot estimate the net effect of ICTs and new media on either campaign or on the outcome of the vote, in this case the

wealthier and more powerful network of civic organizations invested more time and money in new media (in developing Facebook and LinkedIn pages, starting Twitter accounts, and hyperlinking their Web sites to each other) than did the organizations in the less wealthy and powerful network.

6. Conclusions

Civic groups in the pro- and anti-toll road interorganizational networks invested in new media, but also, and more heavily, in old media and in on-the-ground tactics (*cf.*, Hara and Jo, 2007). Groups' levels of investment in new media reflected their levels of investment in old media and on-the-ground tactics: the wealthier and better-connected network was able to invest more because they had more to start with. As with any small-*N* comparative study, caution is needed in drawing general conclusions from our study of the referendum on Proposition One. It is certainly possible that the way wealthy Dallas business interests were able to quickly and effectively mobilize against a grass roots campaign in this case is somewhat unique to Dallas, which has a reputation as a generally business-friendly, politically conservative city.

Despite our study's limitations, we hope to have demonstrated that qualitative, on-the-ground methods for analyzing both organizations and Web sites can contribute a great deal to our understanding of the 'social topology of cyberspace' (Erbach, 2004). Our approach has followed Hara and Estrada (2005) in arguing that online political activities must not be studied "as though they were enacted in a closed world," but rather need to be studied at the grassroots, "in the real world contexts in which they are embedded" [15], with the use of comparative research designs when feasible. Such analyses have the potential to generate fresh insights and knowledge about the effects of new media on politics.

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Notes

1. *E.g.*, Bonchek, 1995, 1997; Gurak and Logie, 2003; Hara and Estrada, 2005; Ward, *et al.*, 2003; Garrett, 2006.

2. Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2002; Wojcieszak, 2009, p. 566; Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001; Myers, 2000; Brainard and Siplon, 2000.

3. Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2009, p. 231.

4. Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2009, p. 232.

5. Diani, 2000; Margolis and Resnick, 2000; di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006, pp. 311–312; Wojcieszak, 2009.

6. In total, TrinityVote collected more than US\$205,000 in political contributions. The largest single contributor was Steve Milwee, an outdoor advertising businessman, who donated billboard space. In addition, funds for TrinityVote brochures and postcards were published from a US\$21,000 donation from Digital 3 Printing, a local business. All campaign contribution information in this section is from Bush and Levinthal (2007).

7. In the weeks preceding the 6 November vote, vandalized versions of signs produced by Vote No! Save the Trinity (the main pro–toll road group) appeared throughout Dallas featuring the words “Vote No! Pave the Trinity” rather than “Save the Trinity.” Vote No! Save the Trinity spokeswoman Becky Mayad publicly requested that Angela Hunt “call upon her supporters to please stop this activity as soon as possible” (Levinthal, 2007d).

8. <http://www.dallasblog.com/200710081000625/sam-merten/notes-from-the-campaign-trail-trinityvote-dominating-debates.html>.

9. The Dallas political consulting team, The Reeds, PRC, coordinated the campaign. A Dallas consulting firm, Elettore, managed the campaign’s Web site and social media. Allyn & Co. handled the advertising. Willis Johnson was hired as a radio commentator for outreach to Dallas’s lower–income southern sector. Political consultant and former president of the Greater Dallas Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Brenda Reyes organized Hispanic outreach, and the consultant Becky Mayad was VNST’s spokeswoman (Levinthal, 2007a).

10. <http://www.dallascitizenscouncil.org/>.

11. <http://dallasouthblog.com/2007/10/17/trinity-vote-no-rap-produced-by-dallas-rapper-dooney/>.

12. <http://www.modelofreality.org/trinity/index.html>.

13. Diani, 2000, p. 386.

[14.](#) Diani, 2000, p. 393.

[15.](#) Hara and Estrada, 2005, p. 503.

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Inter-organizational digital divide: Civic groups' media strategies in the Trinity River Corridor Project

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