Social Media and Marriage Equality in Australia: The Media Roles in the Public Sphere and the Agenda-Setting

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Abstract: Marriage equality or the equal status of same-sex marriage has undergone a rather tough road in Australia, involving diverging opinions in parties at the state and federal levels and constitutional amendments. It appears that people in power set the agenda on the legalization of same-sex marriage. However, it cannot be denied that social media played an almost decisive role in this process because it enabled the gathering of massive public opinion to pressure the government to make changes. To be specific, social media or social networking sites offered platforms for people concerned to share reports about the progress of foreign countries in legalizing same-sex marriage, to express their opinions and to launch campaigns in support of their beliefs. This essay explores the role that social media played in the legalization of marriage equality movement in Australia from the perspectives of the public sphere theory and the agenda-setting theory.

Keywords: Agenda-setting; Australia; Marriage Equality; Legalization; Public Sphere; Same-sex Marriage; Social Media

1. Introduction

LGBTIQ campaigns in the majority of western countries pursue marriage equality as a goal, as the same-sex marriage used to be banned in law. However, in recent years, a growing number of countries have begun to admit the right of marriage equality among citizens. The legalization of same-sex marriage and the realization of equal status with traditional marriage are attributed to the widespread use of social media because of its roles in agenda-setting and in expanding an online public sphere. In the current case of Australia, LGBTIQ groups drew inspiration from the online movements in America, New Zealand, and other countries, and worked together with people concerned in the cause to launch online campaigns in order to pressure the parliament members and political parties to make favourable changes. Therefore, it is argued that social media, like Facebook and Twitter, are the crucial factors in the success of marriage equality in Australia. This essay will discuss the role of social media from how it engaged with the legalization of same-sex marriage, and the reform of the Marriage Act in the theoretical frame of agenda-setting theory and the public sphere theory.

2. Agenda-setting and the role in legalization of marriage equality

According to McCombs, the media could influence the importance of issues on the public agenda by selecting the salience of affairs in media coverage[1]. Then, why do some issues be concerned while some were not? What attracts the collective attention among government elites in political institutions to one issue rather than the other? As the media

plays a vital role in the process of allocating attention, the media can be understood as the basis for information processing decisions[2]. Michelle Wolfe, Bryan D. Jones & Frank R. Baumgartner believed that the media is seen as the central agent in promoting communications and policy, by setting when and why in media's agenda is its role in the political operation[3]. The relationships between the media and social movements, policy changes and the public agenda are mutual, on the one hand, the media have a cumulative effect in highlighting political issues; on the other hand, policy debates and policy outputs feedback to public perceptions, and the policy development process affects the public agenda. Kingdon's studied the role of agenda setting towards elite interviews, which argues that media plays a limited role in facilitating communication in the policy. Political actors are unable to examine remote information from the mass media when it oversupplies information (p. 18–23)[2]. However, the limitations of this study are indicated in the neglect of the role in media attention. There are circumstances of the media's attention to social events before or behind the government so that the audience generated positive or negative feedbacks will also be affected by the order. In the agenda setting, the media can selectively amplify the attention of specific topics, rather than directly determining the content of the public agenda[4].

Although the majority of research findings state the function of agenda setting in printing media or the television, social media has developed fast since the century as it becomes a daily media access among the 80s and the above generation. If a topic is covered frequently and prominently in social media, the audience will regard the issue as more important; social media can influence its audience significantly by giving more prominence and space to certain news items[5]. Also, the major postulation of agenda setting is the salience transfer, media can transfer issues of importance from the media agenda to the public agenda[6]. McCombs highlighted that editors and news directors draw the public's attention and influence the public's perception of what the critical issues of the day are with their selection and display of news each day[1]. The primary function of agenda-setting is to promote social consensus and to create a sense of community. Based on the sharing feature of social media, trending news items can easily arouse the response and support towards the audience.

Obama was the first sitting American president, or rather the first president worldwide, to voice support for the marriage equality rights in 2012[7]. Since then, same-sex marriage or marriage equality have become commonly acceptable words in social media. Australia witnessed ceaseless campaigns by LGBTIQ groups for equal rights to marriage. However, the official recognition of the equal rights of LGBTIQ groups to marriage in the United States undoubtedly boosted the confidence and morale of those in Australia. Mainly, the legal recognition of marriage equality and same-sex marriage in New Zealand gave a significant push to the campaigners in Australia[8]. They resorted to social media, to win social support, and to pressure the government. In terms of the agenda-setting theory, they generated content and launched campaigns online so that they could list same-sex marriage and marriage equality high on the public agenda and thus win widespread support[9]. For example, #postboxselfie team launched a "Yes" campaign, harnessing the power of social media to motivate Australians to cast supportive votes in the same-sex marriage postal survey[10]. In the campaign, the voters were encouraged to take pictures of their voting and share it on social media with the #postboxselfie hashtag among their relatives. Compared with traditional strategies like door-knocking, texting, or phone-calling, social media enabled the campaign to reach a far wider audience. A vast majority of young Australians hold a liberal and open attitude towards same-sex marriage, but they are sometimes reluctant to vote for fear of exposure. Therefore, the successful legalization of same-sex marriage and realization of marriage equality in Australia are attributed to social media which helped place the issue high on the public agenda and to create a substantial online community of people in support of the issue. The agenda-setting role of social media made marriage equality as a priority social issue to be addressed. With the selection and display of news about marriage equality, social media helped form an active online community sharing consensus. The Turnbull Government decided on the AUD$ 122 million postal vote as a way to determine if the Marriage Act should be expanded to include same-sex marriage[11]. The presence of progress worldwide on social media also quickened the steps of marriage equality and government revision of the Marriage Act. Before Australia, 16 countries, including New Zealand, had legally admitted the equal right of marriage[10]. New Zealand is always mentioned together with Australia for the comparison of social progress, which enacted legisla-

tion as early as December 2004 to admit its legal status. Undoubtedly, the progress made by its neighbour fuelled the confidence, determination, and schedule of campaigners in Australia. Therefore, the contents generated by same-sex marriage supporters, and an intensive news report about the progress in western countries, social media in Australia helped put the issue high on the public agenda and helped form a vast online community to push forward the cause.

3. Public sphere, social media and the marriage equality

Social media facilitates the free expression of ideas, opinions about issues by its users. Moreover, public critiques help government scrutinize the current laws and then make revisions in order to quell dissatisfaction and even conflict. The public sphere theory can further help in explaining the role of social media in the legalization of marriage equality in Australia. Social media helped put the issue high on the public agenda, then the public sphere aspect of social media facilitated public debate and therefore quickened the pace of political actions. In the section below, what a public sphere function will be seen in this case, and how it relates to the contribution of social media towards the legalization of same-sex marriage in Australia will be examined.

4. Public sphere and social media

The public sphere is a metaphorical term used to refer to the virtual space in which people can interact around issues of common concern. It is a place where ideas, opinions, and information can circulate, and political opinions can be formed for potential changes[12]. In a public sphere, people can find out what happens in society and what social, cultural, and political issues are placed high on the public agenda. This sphere allows people to engage in public debate and thus invites them to play a role in reaching consensus[13]. According to public sphere theory, individuals can come together to freely identify and discuss social issues and influence political action[14]. Such discussion is called public debate and is defined as the expression of views on matters concerned the public[15]. The public debate takes place through mass media such as TV, newspaper, academic publications, and social media. Comparably, social media is the most convenient and most powerful public sphere platform because it can pool public opinion within a short period and raise the intensity of public debate in a virtuous or vicious circle[16]. According to Hauser, a communication scholar, the public sphere is a discursive space in which individuals and groups come together to discuss matters of mutual interest and to form a collective judgment about them if possible[17]. The public sphere can be seen as a theatre in modern societies where political participation is enacted through the medium of talk[18]. That is to say, involvement in the public sphere is, in fact, a form of political participation. In this sense, the public sphere connects the government and the needs of ordinary people through the vehicle of public opinion; or it could be argued that public sphere is a virtual site where discourses critical of the government are produced and circulated[19].

Some scholars have studied the public sphere from the perspective of participatory democracy and explored how public opinion evolves into public action[20,21]. This theory, the public sphere theory, insists that the public sphere must steer the laws and policies of a government, and governments are legitimate only when they listen to public opinions. According to Fraser, democratic governance is decided by citizens' capacity and opportunity to engage in rational debate[13]. Habermas pointed out that public sphere needs specific means for the transmission of information and to influence those who receive it[22]. Social media has become the dominant source of information and the preferred platform through which users generate content and interact with others around the issues of common interest. Therefore, social media is particularly essential for the formation and maintenance of a public sphere. In general, an established public sphere must have a central figure around whom a large number of followers gather. Also, Habermas identified five types of actors who assume leading roles in the public sphere and push forward events[23]. They are (a) lobbyists representing interest groups; (b) advocates for the rights and interests of marginalized groups who cannot voice their needs effectively; (c) experts who are invited to give advice; (d) moral entrepreneurs to call attention for neglected issues; (e) intellectuals who spontaneously engage in public discourses for the promotion of general interests.

5. Social media's role in marriage equality movement

Same-sex marriage was first introduced to Australia in the Australian Capital Territory in December 2013. The mass media was soon flooded with news about the campaigns launched by people concerned and the progress made in each state and overseas. Social media sites became the dominant source of information and the preferred platform on which users generated content and interacted towards marriage equality. The legalization of same-sex marriage in New Zealand, Britain, and other countries pushed the issue onto the national stage of Australia[24]. Studies revealed that LGBTIQ are heavy users of social media, and they were among the first to realize the potential of the Internet and social media in making their voice heard[25]. Because lacking recognition, and interaction in real life, sexual minorities were among the earliest groups to use chat rooms, newsgroups and affinity portals such as Gay.com to contact like-minded individuals online[26]. Gradually, they began to use social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter to develop communities and participate in politics. LGBTIQ groups in Australia used Facebook and Twitter to launch campaigns and express their views on marriage equality. The "Yes" campaign is a typical example of marriage equality activists using Facebook and Twitter to send unsolicited text messages to gain support for gay marriage, with a significant number of people receiving SMS encouraging them to vote "Yes"[27]. In this process, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull became an advocate for the right of sexual minorities to marriage equality. Undoubtedly, as a social media influencer and opinion leader, Malcolm Turnbull quickened the pace of the legalization of same-sex marriage and realization of marriage equality[28]. Also, Labour senator Penny Wong touched a broad audience on social media with her image of herself wrapped in a pride flag with tears running down her cheek.

In addition to being convenient in reaching a broader audience, another advantage of social media in creating a public sphere for marriage equality movement is that it can create a shared political identity among users. To be specific, according to Ashforth and Mael, who interpreted the social identity theory, an individual's sense of self is to a great extent determined by his or her perceived or real membership in certain groups[29]. Based on the theory of social identity, Eyssel and Loughnan developed the theory of dissonant identity priming, which states that individuals can change their attitude towards social issues if messages prime their social identity[30]. In the case of the current issue, people will become supportive of same-sex marriage if they learn that acquaintances in a shared-identity group are also supporters[31]. By reading the news about social participation in an online campaign, it can be found that African Australians are active supporters of same-sex marriage and marriage equality. In addition to the fact that many African Australians are LGBTIQ, President Obama is a supporter of same-sex marriage and marriage equality boosted their enthusiasm[32]. According to the public sphere theory, President Obama is an advocate for the equal rights of sexual minorities, and he is, in fact, a social media influencer or opinion leader who can appeal to the audience. Flores further explained that messages that prime a shared in-group identity are powerful in mobilizing people because they can shorten the distance between their sender and receiver[33]. In this way, the messages increase the possibility that receivers pay attention and finally approve. The discussion about and campaigns for same-sex marriage and marriage equality became a public sphere nationwide because shared identities quickly attracted the attention of non-LGBTIQ groups and thus significantly increase the chance of persuasion.

6. Public sphere urging of the legalization of same-sex marriage

As stated before, the public sphere is a virtual space where individuals freely identify and discuss social issues of common concern and exert political pressure for expected changes[14]. Leading figures in this sphere hope to reach a broader audience in a short time in order to realize rapid and radical changes in policies and laws. Marriage equality was a significant concern of a broad audience, and therefore, it could harness the power of social networks through such networking sites that like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube[34]. News about this issue flooded these social networking sites and thus infused a strong sense of urgency in the authorities and ordinary citizens. Considering the urgent demand for marriage equality, the Liberal-National Party decided to hold a plebiscite to resolve the same-sex marriage problem[35]. However, it was considered expensive, divisive, and ultimately pointless because of its non-binding nature. This idea was rejected by the Senate twice which relieved advocates of marriage equality. Facing mounting pressure from campaigners both online and offline, the Conservative government MPs geared up for a push to realize a free vote on

this issue. This potential legislation came after 61.6% of 12.7 million respondents voted "Yes" in the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey to changing the law to allow LGBTIQ groups to marry[36]. Facing the mounting pressure from citizens, the Australian legislature finally commenced the Marriage Amendment Act 2017 on September 9, 2017, which redefined marriage, differently from the Marriage Act 1961, as the union of 2 people to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life[37]. Thus, gender became no longer the decisive factor affecting the right to marry in Australia. Same-sex marriage became legal in Australia.

7. Conclusion

This essay discussed the role of social media in the legalization of same-sex marriage and marriage equality in Australia using agenda-setting theory and public sphere theory. It is found that the agenda-setting role of media made the issue of same-sex marriage and marriage equality high on both the media and public agendas. Besides, the public sphere around this issue, created mainly by social media, fermented the intensity of the debate, generated support, and pressured the government to take political action. Social media can create a large public sphere because it can reach a broad audience in a short period and invite each consumer of relevant information to become a participant in the issue. That is because people are more likely to be persuaded if they share an in-group identity with other supporters. In this way, social media and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter made the fight for same-sex marriage and marriage equality a nationwide campaign, leading to the legalization of same-sex marriage after a hundred- hours of debate in the Australian national parliament.

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