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THESIS

**UNDERSTANDING WHERE AMERICA'S PUBLIC
DISCUSSION TAKES PLACE IN TODAY'S SOCIETY:
CASE STUDIES OF CONCEALED WEAPONS CARRY
REFORM**

by

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June 2016

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PLACE IN TODAY'S SOCIETY: CASE STUDIES OF CONCEALED WEAPONS
CARRY REFORM**

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ABSTRACT

Ideally, in America's democratic society, lawmakers pass laws based on the will of the people. The passage of concealed-carry laws across the country would then suggest that there is a significant movement that has pushed these bills through. However, the traditional media has failed to cover this aspect of the changing societal demand. What does this observation suggest about traditional media, which is considered an important medium of public discussion in a democracy? Has another medium for public discussion replaced the Fourth Estate? A case-study approach is used to single out instances in which states that passed concealed-weapons laws did so despite the lack of traditional media coverage.

First, this thesis identifies traditional media trends at the state and national levels within the time period surrounding the passage of handgun reforms. Second, the media trend is compared to the passage of gun legislation and concealed-carry laws to establish the breadth, depth, and reach of traditional media's role in the public sphere. Third, alternative modes of information are compared to identify the presence and impact of other media sources on the public discourse. This research compares and contrasts the roles and importance of traditional and social media in the public sphere today, as evidenced by the coverage of concealed-carry laws and related stories. The research suggests that traditional news media is no longer the main forum for discussions regarding gun regulations in the public sphere. Social media's growing influence in the public has led to its emergence as an alternative to traditional media.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CCW	Concealed Carry Weapons
MCRGO	Michigan Coalition for Responsible Gun Owners
MUCC	Michigan United Conservation Clubs
NRA	National Rifle Association
OCAGV	Ohio Coalition Against Gun Violence
OFCC	Ohioans for Concealed Carry

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I. INTRODUCTION

Recently, the *New York Times* ran a front-page editorial criticizing America's leaders for allowing U.S. citizens the right to own "weapons of mass killing," calling all readers to support new measure of gun control and ban certain types of ammunition.¹ Earlier in the year, the same newspaper published an editorial, citing statistics from a Violence Policy Center's (VPC) study, arguing that concealed carry permit holders are a danger to public safety and that mass shootings are taking place by citizens who are legally armed.²

In light of such news stories, one would think that concealed-carry laws are a limited issue and that gun control laws are on the increase in the United States. Surprisingly, however, the opposite has occurred. In 1986, 41 states either limited or denied residents the right to carry concealed weapons. In contrast, today, 42 states allow concealed carry, with the remaining eight states issuing concealed-carry permits with certain restrictions.³ The traditional media sources have yet to initiate a discussion on the changing laws of the country. While discussions on gun control are frequent in traditional media, what is often not discussed is why so many states have passed legislation allowing concealed carry, especially in a democratic system where the laws reflect public demand.

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The selective reporting of various data by traditional media raises some important questions of the nature of traditional media as a communication tool in a democratic setting. While much was made of the VPC's data, the media did not

¹ Andrew Rosenthal, "The Gun Epidemic," *New York Times*, December 5, 2015, accessed December 13, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/07/insider/the-gun-epidemic-the-making-of-a-page-1-editorial.html>.

² "Concealed Carry's Body Count," *New York Times*, February 11, 2015, accessed December 13, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/11/opinion/concealed-carrys-body-count.html?_r=2.

³ "Right to Carry," *National Rifle Association*, accessed November 28, 2015, <https://www.nraila.org/issues/right-to-carry>.

report the data provided by Crime Prevention Research Center's (CPRC) showing the discrepancies in the two reports. In response to VPC's study, the CPRC researched VPC's data and found overwhelming discrepancies when compared to state police reports.⁴ However, the *New York Times* did not publish the results of this report. This example points to a problem in the traditional media industry's ability to comprehensively disseminate the information available regarding gun control and, in extension, the passage of laws that also reflect societal demands regarding gun usage in the United States. Meanwhile, the passage of these laws in 42 states and the loosening of restricted gun laws raise important questions about the role of media and our public sphere. Is our public sphere becoming less reliant on traditional news media? Where, then, is the discussion occurring that reflects the changing laws?

This thesis attempts to answer the questions by examining traditional media, an important communication tool that, according to various civil society theories, either sets the agenda for what is to be discussed or influences a discussion by bringing important issues into the public sphere.⁵ What does the disparity between prevailing media coverage (or non-coverage) of concealed-carry laws and related stories, on the one hand, and the record of these developments, on the other, say about the role and reach of the mass media in American society today?

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

According to several scholars of democracy, media plays an important communicative role within the public sphere by disseminating important issues,

⁴ "Massive Errors in the Violence Policy Center's Concealed Carry Killers," *Crime Prevention Research Center*, April 24, 2014, accessed December 13, 2015, <http://crimeresearch.org/2014/04/massive-errors-in-the-violence-policy-centers-concealed-carry-killers/>.

⁵ Roy L. Behr and Shanto Iyengar, "Television News, Real-World Cues, and Changes in the Public Agenda," in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No 1 (Oxford: University Press), 38; Jurgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere," in *Media Studies: A Reader*, 3rd ed. ed. Sue Thornham et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 45.

which then facilitates a healthy civil society necessary for democracy.⁶ According to liberal thought, civil society is an important foundation of any political system, especially democracy, according to liberal thought. Ideally in American democratic society, lawmakers pass laws based on the will of the people. Television, newspapers, and online news outlets that make up traditional media are the media that bring to fore what that society deems important—and what society needs to know.

But what if the conventional mass media does not bring an important development into the public sphere? What if it does not engage fully with various actors on different sides of the issues? Lack of reporting on the changing gun laws across the country raises the important question: Why is this the case? Is there an attempt to control information or is there something more complex going on with the communicative public space? If traditional media is considered an important medium of public discussion in a democracy, does the passage of concealed-carry laws suggest that another medium of public discussion has replaced the fourth estate? Years ago, observers may have raised the cry of censorship or a “chilling” of the national conversation; today, however, the complexity of our public space points to the possible development of new horizontal spaces very important for democratic debate. This thesis then examines the advent of social media as news and communications space that may have ended the traditional media’s monopoly hold on information in the public sphere.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

Several theories exist to explain how media is used in a democratic society, how it relates to the audience, and how media has evolved in the information age. The following theories provide an important framework for understanding the media’s role in the public sphere, which ultimately shapes public policy.

⁶ Habermas, “The Public Sphere,” 49–50.

1. Understanding Media in Democracy

According to Habermas, media is the main form of communication in today's public sphere. In a complex modern nation-state, society relies on the media to communicate among its diverse and far-flung members.⁷ In a democratic society, media is an important tool used to facilitate public discussion between the formal and informal institutions comprising the public sphere.⁸ Formal institutions include political parties, corporations, lobby groups, and government; while informal institutions include families, simple interactions, popular culture, and social interaction through chat rooms and blogs.⁹ The former political institutions then respond to the discussion as a reflection of civil society. Because media is the main communication tool within the public sphere, it plays a defining role in shaping public opinion. In turn, public opinion determines elections, government decision-making, and laws in American democracy.¹⁰

Thus, the media's ability to devote more coverage to a topic can create more public concern toward it. According to Behr and Iyengar, the media has the ability to shape the public agenda through the amount of attention the media devotes to an issue. "By raising public concern for particular issues," as Iyengar states, "the media may also alter the criteria citizens use to evaluate their leaders."¹¹ Journalists and editors have the ability to set media agenda, which research shows, does affect public opinion.¹²

Conversely, scholars Golding and Elliot explain that the selection and use of information is determined in relation to news value and the news production

⁷ Habermas, "The Public Sphere," 45.

⁸ Habermas, "The Public Sphere," 49–51.

⁹ Jurgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 366–67.

¹⁰ Habermas, "The Public Sphere," 45–51.

¹¹ Roy L. Behr and Shanto Iyengar, "Television News, Real-World Cues, and Changes in the Public Agenda," in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 49, no 1 (Oxford: University Press), 38.

¹² *Ibid.*, 38–57.

process.¹³ News value is based on the presumption of the information holding the audience's attention, the accessibility of information, and its fit in production methods.¹⁴ Journalists normally do not choose specifically what information will be broadcast or printed. A domination of commercial factors may have shifted media's ability to provide factual, pertinent information relevant to public discussion to information that either pleases the audience through entertainment or provides an escape from reality for viewers. These commercial factors lead to cutbacks in commercial as well as investigative costs. According to Champlin and Knoedler, "while the push for ratings pushes journalism toward features that appear to be commercially lucrative, it also drags it toward the lowest cost alternative and away from risky and expensive investigative work."¹⁵ These theories provide some guide to understanding why mass media produces information regarding concealed carry that is not aligned with the public opinion. This information then can be either ignored by the public or reinterpreted in different ways.

2. Understanding Media and Audience Relationship

The following scholars argue that complexity exists between the audience-media relationship. In other words, it is not a one-way street. This is important for this thesis because the relationship could enhance or diminish the media's role in forming public opinion. It may also explain how some information by traditional media is ignored by the public or reinterpreted in different ways based on audience perceptions.

Such scholars as Baudrillard take a distinctly negative view of media, asking pointedly whether media produce a "formless" or "informed" sphere, or

¹³ Peter Golding and Philip Elliott, "News Values and News Production," in *Media Studies: A Reader*, 3rd ed. ed. Sue Thornham et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 635.

¹⁴ Ibid., 636.

¹⁵ Dell Champlin and Janeit Knoedler, "Operating in the Public Interest or in Pursuit of Private Profits? News in the Age of Media Consolidation," *Journal of Economic Issues*, 36 No 2 (June 2002), 463.

does the public resist the media's message by ignoring it?¹⁶ He offers the following two opposing hypotheses concerning the media: 1) "They are the strategy of power," which aims to confuse the public sphere and force its own evidences; or 2) "They are the strategic territory of the ruse of the masses" who employ absolute control in repudiating reality.¹⁷ His first hypothesis implies that media aims to distort truth and reality with its own meaning. Brian Patrick's analysis of traditional media's selection of sources in discussing concealed carry supports this hypothesis, showing a larger proportion of anti-gun experts complemented with preference to "naïve, non-professional pro-gun sources."¹⁸

Baudrillard's second hypothesis can be interpreted in that the public drives media's perversion of the truth to satisfy an appetite for entertainment. A recent Pew Research Center study showed that many Americans believed crime was on the rise while statistics indicate a 20-year low, with many blaming the media's new coverage as the cause.¹⁹ The public demands sensational media information, so media covers an enormous amount of violence and crime, which creates the perception that crime is increasing.

While media does put out messages driven by either commercial priorities or agenda setting, the audience receives messages based on their priorities and views. Stuart Hall, in describing his encoding-decoding framework, theorizes that while media encodes certain messages, the audience decodes them in a different way.²⁰ This framework is important in understanding the disconnect between the audience and the traditional media, while the traditional media

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, "The Masses: The Implosion of the Social Media," in *Media Studies: A Reader*, 3rd ed. ed. Sue Thornham et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 61.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Brian Anse Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-media: Informational Sociology of the American Concealed Weapon Carry Movement*, 2nd ed., (London: Arktos, 2014). 171.

¹⁹ Andrew Kohut, "Despite Lower Crime Rates, Support For Gun Rights Increases," *Pew Research Center*, April 17, 2015, accessed December 2, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/17/despite-lower-crime-rates-support-for-gun-rights-increases/>.

²⁰ Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, 2nd ed., ed. by Meenakshi Durham and Douglas Kellner, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 165–66.

focuses on negative aspects of owning guns, the audience, or citizens, appear to be engaged in discussions regarding the subject elsewhere as evidenced by the widespread passage of concealed carry legislation. In other words, while traditional media is doing well as an entertainment tool, discussions pertaining to laws have found another medium.²¹

Golding and Elliot connect audience preferences to the commercial nature of media. They argue that the selection and use of information is determined in relation to news value and the news production process.²² News value is based on the presumption of the information holding the audience's attention, the accessibility of information, and its fit in production methods.²³ News production can be thought of as a checklist of factors concerning various types of information that are irrelevant to being directly attuned to discussion within the public sphere. These factors include drama, visual attractiveness, entertainment, importance, size, proximity, brevity, negativity, recency, elites, personalities, bias, objectivity, and ideology.²⁴ Thus, the purpose of commercial media may have shifted its value of providing factual, pertinent information relevant to public discussion to information that either pleases the audience through entertainment or provides an escape from reality for viewers.

The following two analyses support Golding's thesis. Patrick argues news editors viewed right to carry news as a "hot button" topic that generated public opinion response and expansion, yet his research suggests the media's dissemination of information was rarely intelligent, informative and substantive.²⁵ Additionally, John Lott's investigative research on the *Washington Post's* reporting of the Appalachian law school shooting revealed that the reporter, who interviewed the two students who stopped the shooter with personal firearms,

²¹ Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," 163–73.

²² Peter Golding and Philip Elliott, "News Values and News Production," in *Media Studies: A Reader*, 3rd ed. ed. Sue Thornham et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 635.

²³ *Ibid.*, 636.

²⁴ Golding and Elliott, "News Values and News Production," 636–42.

²⁵ Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-media*, xiii.

excluded the fact they used their own firearms due to “space constraints.”²⁶ These examples illustrate how these commercial factors play into exclusion and inclusion of some information regarding concealed carry in the reporting process. Such kind of reporting is then either ignored by the public or reinterpreted in different ways.

3. Media in the Information Society

The media sector has clearly changed due to communication technology and, more importantly globalization, which has expanded the public sphere. In addition, with the advent of satellite technology and the Internet, according to Hjarvard, the media setting has changed.²⁷ He suggests that the globalization of media and the creation of a network society are important new factors that need to be understood in the expansion of the public sphere. This new “network society” is solely connected through digital networks rather than mass media disseminated information. Unlike mass media’s one-directional supply of information, social media allows two-directional public discussion within the public sphere.²⁸ The new expanded public sphere allows the public to seek new sources of information and freely communicate opinions and concerns. This framework of new media may help to understand the emergence of an alternative or competing public sphere where the concealed carry discussion may be occurring because it is visibly absent in traditional media.

Manuel Castells points to how advent of new technology and globalization shape the media. He argues the emergence of this new network allows an endless expansion of “identity-based social movements aimed at changing the

²⁶ John R. Lott, Jr, *The Bias Against Guns: Why Almost Everything You’ve Heard About Gun Control Is Wrong*, (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2003), 24–26.

²⁷ Stig Hjarvard, “News Media and the Globalization of the Public Sphere,” in *Media Studies: A Reader*, 3rd ed. ed. Sue Thornham et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 671–72.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 682.

cultural foundations of society.”²⁹ This new network sphere allows the public to create networks and create discussion with people who carry similar views. Within this new sphere, the public has access to vast amounts of global information and can choose which type of information to view. Specifically, Castell theorizes that identity-based social movements may be sources directly contributing to changes in the cultural foundations within the public sphere.³⁰ Unlike the mass media, individuals have the ability to contribute to media discussions and share experiences across a global public sphere.³¹ Therefore, the public has the ability to either ignore traditional media and obtain news, events, and knowledge about issues in the virtual realm—or to reach to the Internet to validate and substantiate traditional media’s message.

Communications scholar Brian Patrick, in the only in-depth scholarly work pertaining to social movements in passing concealed carry laws, argues that the lack of “meaningful access to the mass public forum provided by major news media and public institutions” drew concealed carry advocates to create a virtual network sphere.³² The rise of the Internet provided these social movements with a communication tool capable of reaching out to the public outside of traditional media channels. Social media became an effective medium to carry out discussion not only within a local community, but also across state boundaries. These social movements have been used to counter traditional media’s publishing of information by anti-gun groups.³³

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The research question posed three important issues for consideration that are explored in this research: 1) the importance of traditional media in influencing

²⁹ Manuel Castells, “An Introduction to the Information Age,” in *Media Studies: A Reader*, 3rd ed. ed. Sue Thornham et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 161.

³⁰ Castells, “An Introduction to the Information Age,” 163.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 152–64.

³² Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-media*,” 14.

³³ *Ibid.*, 168.

the public sphere; 2) the decline of traditional media's relevance in the public sphere; and 3) the emergence of social media as a new form of communication.

Hypothesis 1: Traditional news media is no longer the main forum for discussions, especially regarding gun regulations, in the public sphere. The public's perception of traditional media as a reliable form of information is declining. A 2014 Gallop Poll states that "Americans' confidence in the media's ability to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly" has dropped to 40 percent.³⁴ Traditional media is losing relevance if information that it disseminates is not received by the viewer, as they increasingly turn to the Internet for issues that pertain to them. Media as a commercial institution focused on capturing ratings is increasingly viewed as entertainment rather than an informational provider.

Hypothesis 2: Social media's growing influence on the public sphere has led to its emergence as an alternative to traditional media—possibly replacing the fourth estate. For example, a search on the social media site Facebook using concealed carry shows more than 92,000 people are talking about the subject, and the U.S. Conceal Carry Association page lists well more than 1.6 million likes.³⁵ This development has different implications for democracy as possibly two disconnected public spheres exist.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

Research for this thesis is conducted by reviewing scholarly literature on American traditional media, social media, as well as state and federal legislation. Primary-source research on gun control and concealed carry discussions is conducted in three areas: mainstream media, local newspaper articles, and the Internet. Although globalization has expanded the public sphere, I looked only at media produced in the United States, which contributes specifically to changes in

³⁴ Justin McCarthy, "Trust in Mass Media Returns to All-Time Low," September 17, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/176042/trust-mass-media-returns-time-low.aspx>.

³⁵ "USCCA," Facebook, accessed December 12, 2015, https://www.facebook.com/USCCA/?fref=ts&ref=br_tf.

American legislation and reflects American civil society debates. In terms of timeframe, I focused on the past 30 years, which oversaw the largest changes to concealed carry laws.

A case study approach is used to single out instances where states passed concealed weapons carry reforms. First, I intend to identify traditional media trends at the state and national level within the time period surrounding the passage of handgun reforms. Second, the media trend is compared to the passage of gun legislation and concealed-carry laws to establish the breadth, depth, and reach of traditional media's role in the public sphere. Next, alternate mediums of information are compared to identify the presence and impact of other media sources on the public discourse. From this basis, the research compares and contrasts the roles and importance of traditional media and social media in the public sphere today, as evidenced by the coverage of concealed-carry laws and related stories.

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II. FLORIDA CASE STUDY

Just twenty years ago the prospect of widespread liberalization of gun control laws, especially the passage of these “right to carry” or “shall issue” laws on concealed carry, seemed improbable, if not impossible. Back then the trend regarding guns would have seemed unmistakably clear: increased regulation and control, as evidenced by the polls, editorial and expert opinion, and legislative initiatives. Rigorous gun control seemed not only the viable social cause—but inevitable.

—Brian Anse Patrick
Rise of the Anti-Media

In 1983, the *Miami Herald* reported that Florida led the nation in handgun deaths and editorialized that the state legislature should address the issue with greater restrictions.³⁶ The article cited statistics provided by Handgun Control Inc. and the Florida Coalition to Halt Handgun Crime, Inc., which showed that handgun deaths in Broward and Dade counties alone totaled 483 within a 10-month period the previous year.³⁷ Another article highlighted a poll conducted in south Florida, indicating that three quarters of residents favored controls over the sale of handguns and that 82 percent of those responding favored requiring a concealed weapon permit applicant to exhibit a legitimate need for it.³⁸ In June 1984, Palm Beach County passed its strictest handgun law by 4–1, requiring a 14-day hold on the purchase of handguns.³⁹

Three years, later, Florida’s state legislature simultaneously passed two bills, known as the *Joe Carlucci Uniform Firearms Act* and the *Jack Hagler Self Defense Act*, which, according to the *Florida State Law Review*

³⁶ Bill Braucher, “Handgun Law is a Matter of Common Sense,” *Miami Herald*, January 16, 1983, sec. N.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Stephen Reiss, “Poll: Most Want Control of Handguns,” *Miami Herald*, December 8, 1983, sec. PB.

³⁹ Neil Brown, “County Passes Strict Handgun Law,” *Miami Herald*, June 13, 1984, sec. A.

voided all local ordinances and denied local governments the power to enact any firearm regulation in the future except for a limited cooling-off period . . . [and] liberalized the restrictions that previously hindered the citizens of Florida from obtaining concealed weapons permits.⁴⁰

Essentially, when the Florida governor signed these bills into law, all previous handgun control measures and restrictions that had been enacted by local governments were no longer valid. Where had the overwhelming mandate to control guns and to limit lawful gun ownership gone in such a short time?

The question asks more exactly: If the media was correctly reporting a majority Floridian opinion concerning handgun laws, then why did the bills that nullified and voided handgun controls in Florida become law? This case study seeks to explain the contradiction between what the media was reporting and what Floridians voted for through an examination of the case of Florida Legislative proceedings concerning handgun laws. The study analyzes the media reports before, during, and after the laws' passage, and compares the media's follow-on predictions pertaining to new laws and their actual effects.

A. FLORIDA'S PRIOR STATUTES

Starting in 1893, Florida maintained a discretionary system in which county commissioners held the authority to regulate and issue concealed weapons carry licenses in the state of Florida.⁴¹ As such, each county established its own cost, criteria, and method of determining who should be issued a permit. The disparity of costs ranged from a \$10 application fee in Duval County to a non-refundable application fee of \$2,200 in southern Florida's Monroe County.⁴² Moreover, paying the application fee in any county did not assure that one would receive a permit. The differences in criteria between

⁴⁰ Richard Getchell, "Review of Florida Legislation; Comment: Carrying Concealed Weapons in Self-Defense: Florida Adopts Uniform Regulations for the Issuance of Concealed Weapons Permits," 15 Fla. St. U.L. Rev. 751, Florida State University Law, Winter, 1987, sec V .

⁴¹ Getchell, "Review of Florida Legislation," sec. III; Ch. 4147, sec. 2-3, Laws of FL (1893).

⁴² Brian Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 69.

counties were even more debatable. Some counties issued permits to any person over age 21 that did not have criminal histories.

Other counties required psychological examinations paid for independently by the applicant, personal interviews with the county sheriff and/or a county licensing commission, and proof of a legitimate need to possess a permit.⁴³ To make matters more confusing, a permit issued in one county was normally not valid in another. If a person worked or travelled frequently into other counties, he or she would have to apply for a separate permit in each county. Additionally, each county in Florida had the ability to enact various handgun regulations within its districts, such as prohibited zoning ordinances, mandatory background checks, and waiting periods during the purchase of a weapon; however, any state resident could easily go to another county with fewer restrictions and purchase a weapon.⁴⁴

As crime rates increased in Florida, more residents sought to carry firearms for personal protection—and more Floridians encountered the chaos of the Sunshine State’s decentralized and uncoordinated gun restrictions. For example, in 1984, Dade County became the murder capital of the nation with Florida taking fourth place in states with the highest murder rate.⁴⁵ Throughout the early to mid-1980s, Florida lawmakers started taking notice of their constituents’ call for changes, but the media failed to report the public’s growing grievances with the law and focused more on reporting handgun-control initiatives.

B. DISPARITIES IN A DISCRETIONARY SYSTEM

The discretion given to each of Florida’s 67 counties in determining who may be issued a concealed weapons carry license also provided license issuers

⁴³ Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 69–70.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*; Getchell, “Review of Florida Legislation,” sec. V, A.

⁴⁵ William E. Gibson, “Dade Tops Nation in Homicides,” *Sun Sentinel*, July 27, 1985, http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1985-07-27/news/8501310244_1_homicide-rate-murder-rate-murder-capital.

the opportunity to discriminate against applicants. The differences between local discretionary practices became a major grievance among residents who believed they had as much right to be issued a permit as residents in a neighboring county.

Under this old system, some counties appointed licensing boards, while others appointed law enforcement officials or designated licensing commissioners to approve or disapprove applications.⁴⁶ The people appointed to these positions held the sole power to decide who would be issued a license within the county; likewise, they had the ability to deny any applicant who they felt did not have a valid reason to carry a concealed weapon. Consequently, determining factors included political influence, social connections, and other arbitrary reasons. For example, in some counties, licenses were only issued to applicants who supported the reigning political party, worked in a particular line of work, or had family or social connections with certain public officials.⁴⁷ Thus, the discretionary system might grant a permit to a close friend of a county supervisor but deny one to someone with a valid need to carry a weapon in self-defense. For instance, a doctor who worked at an abortion clinic that had recently been bombed and whose life had been threatened was denied a license to carry because he was not part of a security business.⁴⁸

Another negative effect of the discretionary system came from the process of appeal to the licensing officials, which often ranged into deeply personal, if barely relevant, questioning. Brian Patrick describes how applicants might have to “kowtow to self-important local authorities . . . arrogant officials . . . [and] clerks full of themselves with snide attitudes” and how humiliated applicants were at “having to kiss up; being turned down; and having to justify themselves, their mental health, or personal business to boards of officious government servants,

⁴⁶ Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 69–71.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Clayton Cramer and David Kopel, “Shall Issue: The New Wave of Concealed Handgun Permit Laws,” *Tennessee Law Review*, 62 *Tenn. L. Rev.* 679, Spring, 1995, sec. II, B.

no better than themselves.”⁴⁹ Patrick believes that these actions were a significant motivating grievance to the former law, which may have had an impact on the changes that followed.⁵⁰

C. FLORIDA LAW REFORMS DEFEATED

In 1985, Florida’s state legislators successfully proposed and passed a concealed weapons bill through both the House and Senate. When it arrived on Governor Bob Graham’s desk, however, he vetoed it. Democrat Graham and his political associate, Senate president Harry Johnston, were staunch handgun control advocates who aimed to ensure that handgun regulations remained in place.⁵¹ So when House and Senate legislatures reconvened in 1986 and announced their plan to override the veto, Graham and Johnston quietly set in motion their own plan to secure enough votes in the Senate to halt the override.

The political methods employed to keep the Senate from reaching enough votes to override the veto included financial concessions to supporting Senators. In reference to a Senator’s vote from Jacksonville to sustain the veto, Johnston was quoted as saying, “We bought him, lock, stock and barrel . . . the Governor just outright bribed him.”⁵² Unsurprisingly, Florida lawmakers failed in their attempts to override the veto.

But 1986 was an election year and public voters were paying attention to Florida politics. In the November elections, 73 of the 88 candidates supported by the National Rifle Association (NRA) won.⁵³ Notably, the House held its majority of representatives supportive of pro-handgun initiatives, while the Senate lost five seats held by handgun control advocates. Former Senator Johnston, the resolute opponent of handguns, made his bid for the governor’s seat but was defeated in

⁴⁹ Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 71.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Mike Wilson, “Outgunned,” *Miami Herald*, September 27, 1987, sec. Tropic.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

the primaries by former House representative, Steve Pajcic.⁵⁴ Pajcic was also known for proposing handgun restrictions, as he had sponsored a gun control measures while in office.⁵⁵ Instead, Bob Martinez, the former mayor of Tampa who had recently changed his party affiliation to Republican following a meeting with Ronald Reagan, won the governor's race and became the second Republican in Florida's history to be elected to the office.⁵⁶ It is very possible that the ongoing debates over Florida's gun laws led to the election of a Republican governor. By the time the Florida legislature went into the 1987 session, the Senate had been overhauled. Before the elections, anti-handgun representatives controlled the best committees to stall and table handgun reforms; whereas after, those remaining were shuffled out of leadership positions where they could not pose a threat to future reform bills.

D. THE NEW LEGISLATURE AND LAW REFORM PASSAGE

Florida lawmakers in both democratically controlled chambers wasted no time in drafting handgun reforms, and by April 7, both the House and Senate concurrently submitted two bills each.⁵⁷ Senate Bill 254 and House Bill 251 preempted all firearms regulations and reserved such regulation to the state, where as Senate Bill 253 and House Bill 253 authorized the state to issue concealed weapons carry licenses.⁵⁸ After one committee substitute and some minor amendments, the House bills were put up for a vote on April 21, both

⁵⁴ "September 2, 1986 Primary Election: Democratic Party," Florida Department of State Division of Elections, accessed June 4, 2016, [https://results.elections.myflorida.com/Index.asp?ElectionDate=9/2/1986&DATAMODE=.](https://results.elections.myflorida.com/Index.asp?ElectionDate=9/2/1986&DATAMODE=)

⁵⁵ "Gun Control Measure is Defeated," *Boca Raton News*, May 28, 1976, Sec. 5, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1291&dat=19760528&id=FxVUAAAIAAJ&sjid=FY0DAAAIAAJ&pg=3879,3633707&hl=en>.

⁵⁶ Anders Gyllenhaal, "Tampa Mayor Bob Martinez on a Controversial Plateau," *St. Petersburg Independent*, August 13, 1983, Sec. 7A, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=zJhjAAAIAAJ&sjid=H1kDAAAIAAJ&pg=7114%2C3057872>.

⁵⁷ "Florida Senators 1845–2001," University of Florida, accessed June 4, 2016, <http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/feidl/florida/Senate18452001.html>; "House of Representatives," University of Florida, Last accesses June 4, 2016, <http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/feidl/florida/House19672001.html>.

⁵⁸ Getchell, "Review of Florida Legislation," sec. IV; Fla. SB 254, sec. 1 (1987); Fla. HB 251, sec 1 (1987); Fla. SB 253, sec. 1 (1987); Fla. HB 253, sec 1 (1987).

receiving passage by considerable margins of 81 to 35 and 88 to 30, respectively.⁵⁹ The Senate replaced Senate Bill 254 with House Bill 251 and passed both the House Bill 251 and combined Senate/House Bill 253 by an equal margin of 29 to 11.⁶⁰ On May 12, 1987, Governor Martinez signed the bills into law.

1. The Preemption Act

When House Bill 251 was signed into law, it became the Joe Carlucci Uniform Firearms Act, more commonly known as the Preemption Act. As written and codified into Florida Statute § 790.33, section one states:

Except as expressly provided by the State Constitution or general law, the Legislature hereby declares that it is occupying the whole field of regulation of firearms and ammunition, including the purchase, sale, transfer, taxation, manufacture, ownership, possession, storage, and transportation thereof, to the exclusion of all existing and future county, city, town, or municipal ordinances or any administrative regulations or rules adopted by local or state government relating thereto. Any such existing ordinances, rules, or regulations are hereby declared null and void.⁶¹

In other words, every regulation concerning firearms and ammunition enacted by local governments, estimated at approximately 400, were thereby cancelled.

The biggest contention was that every gun control measure passed by counties was no longer valid or enforceable. For example, counties could no longer issue concealed carry weapons permits, require firearms registration, or regulate types of weapons sold. The only power left to the local governments was the option to enact a 48-hour waiting period between the purchase and delivery of a handgun.⁶² On the other hand, the entire state now had one

⁵⁹ Getchell, "Review of Florida Legislation," sec. IV, B; Fla. H.R. Jour. 205, 209, 213–14 (Reg. Sess. 1987).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, sec. IV, A; Fla. S. Jour. 291 (Reg. Sess. 1987).

⁶¹ Fla. Stat. § 790.33, sec. 1.

⁶² *1987 Summary of General Legislation*, Florida Legislature, September, 1987, 327–28.

standardized set of laws concerning all firearms within the state, which drastically reduced confusion among the populace. The new law laid out new prohibitions and penalties enforceable statewide. Additionally, the Preemption Act was necessary to set the legal framework for passage of Florida's new concealed weapons carry law.

2. The Concealed Carry Weapons Law

The passage of the Combined Senate and House Bill 253 into law, otherwise known as the Jack Hagler Self-Defense Act, authorized the Florida Department of State to issue licenses to carry concealed weapons. The license would be valid throughout the state for a period of three years. The law established both qualifying and disqualifying criteria for applicants, the method for obtaining a license, a maximum applicant determination period of 90 days, and the cost to process initial and renewal applications. The law also set requirements for fingerprinting, mandatory cursory investigations, and maintaining an online database of license holders.⁶³

As outlined in the Florida Legislature Summary and written into law, applicants were required to: be at least 21 years of age; be a resident of Florida residing in the state for at least six months; desire a legal means to carry a concealed weapon or firearm for legal self-defense; have no disability that prevents safe handling of a weapon; have no felony convictions; have not been committed for controlled substance abuse or found guilty of a violation of Chapter 893 Florida Statute within the past three years of application; have not been committed as an alcoholic; have no more than one Driving Under the Influence convictions within the past three years; have not been committed to a mental institution; and demonstrate competency with a firearm.⁶⁴ Additionally, the Department of State could deny any applicant found guilty of a violent crime in the past three years and revoke or suspend a license if licensee became unable

⁶³ Getchell, "Review of Florida Legislation," sec. V, B.

⁶⁴ *1987 Summary of General Legislation*, Florida Legislature, September, 1987, 324–26.

to meet the applicant requirements.⁶⁵ While mainstream media published articles that envisioned the state to begin handing out gun permits to anyone, Florida instituted objective requirements for the issuance of a concealed-weapon carry permit applicable to all gun-eligible Floridians.⁶⁶

E. MEDIA COVERAGE LEADING UP TO LAWS' PASSAGE

In the years running up to the passage of Florida's new weapons laws, the media insisted that polls that showed people favoring more handgun controls nationwide. For example, the *Miami Herald* ran a column citing a 1981 Gallup Poll that showed 91 percent of Americans favored a 21-day waiting period between the purchase and delivery of a handgun, and that 71 percent favored a law requiring handgun purchasers to obtain a permit prior to purchase.⁶⁷ Two other articles cited polls conducted across a southern Florida county that showed nearly three-quarters of the population supported handgun control laws, with 82 percent in favor of a stricter concealed weapons law.⁶⁸ In another article, a columnist goes as far as to state that "every poll on the subject clearly shows that the majority of Americans want handgun control."⁶⁹ Opinion polls conducted to gauge public opinion on gun control and concealed weapons carry laws were used by the media to show that a majority of Americans favored stricter regulations. Yet, when voters in Florida went to cast their ballots, more and more pro-gun lawmakers were elected.

Similarly, media's national coverage shows that a majority of Americans support increased gun control legislation. Between 1981 and 1988, the *New York*

⁶⁵ 1987 *Summary of General Legislation*, Florida Legislature, September, 1987, 326.

⁶⁶ Wilson, "Outgunned."

⁶⁷ Charles Whited, "Gun Zealots are at Odds with Majority," *Miami Herald*, February 2, 1983, sec. D.

⁶⁸ Stephen Reiss, "Poll: Most Want Control of Handguns," *Miami Herald*, December 8, 1983, sec. PB; "Straw Vote Set for Ballot in Primary Ballot to Poll Views of Handguns, Taxes," *Miami Herald*, February 1, 1984, sec. PB.

⁶⁹ Bill Braucher, "Handgun Law is a Matter of Common Sense," *Miami Herald*, January 16, 1983, sec. N.

Times ran several articles citing data showing that between 59 and 65 percent of Americans favored stricter handgun control laws and that only a small minority, 4 percent, favored less-strict controls.⁷⁰ Additionally, the *Washington Post* reported even higher numbers, stating that “public-opinion surveys show that 80 percent of Americans support stronger handgun laws.”⁷¹ Yet, in May 1986, President Reagan signed into federal law the Firearms Owners Protection Act, which loosened restrictions on the sale, purchase, and transportation of firearms across state lines. Passage of the Firearms Owners Protection Act weakened federal gun controls put in place by the 1968 Gun Control Act.⁷²

Media’s reporting of the public’s opinion concerning handgun control laws was somewhat misleading and inaccurate. The media failed to report how the opinion polls were in stark contrast to election results. Former President Truman once emphasized elections are more accurate than opinion polls when he stated, “I think the best poll there is, is the count after the election.”⁷³ For three years, Florida’s legislative body had put forth legislation to repeal local handgun controls and pass a concealed weapons carry law, which had consistently been tabled and vetoed by pro-handgun control lawmakers. The public responded by voting for a majority of representatives in the 1986 elections that supported the relaxation in handgun controls. Instead of associating the Florida elections results heavily favoring pro-gun representatives and lawmakers to public opinion, the media ran articles stating that pro-gun lobbyists, such as the NRA, were responsible for the relaxation of handgun controls rather than voters.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ “Controls on Guns Supported in Poll,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1983, sec. A; William Schmidt, “Pressure for Gun Control Rises and Falls, but Ardor for Arms Seems Constant,” *New York Times*, October 25, 1987, Sec. 4.

⁷¹ Lou Cannon, “Sarah Brady and the NRA,” *The Washington Post*, March 28, 1988, sec. 1.

⁷² “Reagan Sign Measure Relaxing Gun Controls,” *New York Times*, May 20, 1986, sec. A.

⁷³ David Kopel, “Media Bias in Coverage of Gun Control; The Press Evaluates the Popular Culture,” in *The Gun Culture and its Enemies*, ed. William R. Tonso (Bellevue, WA: Merril Press, 1990), 182.

⁷⁴ William Schmidt, “Pressure for Gun Control Rises and Falls, But Ardor for Arms Seems Constant,” *New York Times*, October 25, 1987, sec. 4.

F. MEDIA COVERAGE AFTER LAW'S PASSAGE

After the passage of Florida's new preemption and concealed carry weapons laws, the media published several articles predicting a rise in crime and gun-related incidents in a gun-mad Florida. For example, the *Chicago Tribune* ran an article titled "Living with Loony Handgun Laws," which described concealed-carrying Floridians as being able to act out vengeance similar to the character Charles Bronson played in the movie *Death Wish* and claimed that the new law "will have less impact on its crime rate than on its funeral industry."⁷⁵ Another newspaper ran a column by Bill Braucher, titled "Gun Law Opens Season on Humans," which cited Howard Forman, a Broward County commissioner, who blamed the Florida legislature for effectively making the people of Florida quarry for gun-toting predators.⁷⁶ Forman, who also protested the new law's 48-hour waiting period, predicted dire consequences for Florida's \$60--billion-plus tourism industry, telling the *Sun Sentinel*, "[Tourists] may want to go to Disney World, but they don't want to come to Dodge City."⁷⁷ Forman's concern was rooted in a particularly dim view of human nature—or at least the nature of gun owners: "If you have a weapon, you're going to use it."⁷⁸ Forman lamented the demise of Broward County's previous requirements—a 10-day waiting period and mandatory criminal and psychological background checks conducted by the county sheriff—and claimed that the law "will have a quarter of the impact of what we have now" in terms of gun deaths.⁷⁹ Similarly, the *New York Times* ran an article stating that the passage of the new laws could set the

⁷⁵ Clarence Page, "Living with Loony Handgun Laws," *Chicago Tribune*, October 11, 1987, sec. P.

⁷⁶ Bill Braucher, "Gun Law Opens Season on Humans," *Miami Herald*, October 1, 1987, sec. N.

⁷⁷ John Kennedy, "Proposed Handgun Law Generates Hot Debate," *Sun Sentinel*, April 12, 1987, http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1987-04-12/news/8701230678_1_handgun-bill-gun-laws-cooling-off-period.

⁷⁸ Bill Braucher, "Gun Law Opens Season on Humans."

⁷⁹ Jon Marcus, "Gun Control Advocates Fear Effects of Eased Restrictions," *Sun Sentinel*, April 26, 1987, http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1987-04-26/news/8701260585_1_handgun-county-commissions-background-checks.

conditions for a “bitter harvest,” including quoting a State Representative opposing the legislation who believed Florida would “become an armed camp.”⁸⁰

The media’s prediction of increased gun violence in Florida was inaccurate. In 1995, Clayton Cramer and David Kopel published a report that analyzed state crime statistics before and after the passage of non-discretionary concealed weapons laws. According to their study, Florida had the most detailed information on the impact of its concealed weapons carry law and that Dade County, in particular, had data on all criminal incidents involving license-holders.⁸¹ The study compared Florida’s murder rates compared to the national average before and after the laws’ passage, which showed that the rate began “declining rapidly and consistently” in contrast to the murder rates found across the rest of the country.⁸² Dade County abandoned its data-collection program in 1992 because of the rarity of incidents involving license-holders with the leading carry law opponent in Florida admitting that “there are a lot of people, including myself, who thought things would be a lot worse as far as that particular situation [carry reform] is concerned. I’m happy to say they’re not.”⁸³

G. CONCLUSION

Overall, the media did not accurately report what was occurring in Florida. Laws that regulated handguns and limited the issuing of concealed carry weapons permits were reported favorably by the media. Handgun control advocates received more media coverage. On the other hand, few media reports covered the public’s grievances with the discretionary system or offered a balanced discussion between pro-carry and handgun control supporters. As a whole, the media portrayed Floridians as being against changes to the existing

⁸⁰ “Florida Bills To Ease Curbs on Concealed Firearms,” *New York Times*, May 13, 1987, sec. A.

⁸¹ Clayton Cramer and David Kopel, “Shall Issue: The New Wave of Concealed Handgun Permit Laws,” *Tennessee Law Review*, 62 *Tenn. L. Rev.* 679, Spring, 1995, sec. II, B.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*; Michael Warren, “Concealed Weapons Owners No Trouble,” *Gainesville Sun*, November 4, 1990, sec. 1A.

laws. The passage of Florida's gun law reforms proved that the mainstream media was out of touch with public opinion and did not communicate the whole discussion.

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III. MICHIGAN AND OHIO CASE STUDIES

If, as Chapter II showed, the mainstream media stylizes or silences a range of viewpoints on concealed-carry laws, then where does the discussion take place? The fact that every state has enacted concealed weapons carry laws at some level suggests another public sphere, which the expansion of gun laws appears to reflect. This chapter focuses on the concealed weapons carry movement and how supporters disseminated discussion without the involvement of mainstream media. Specifically, this chapter will analyze the actions of gun-rights supporters in Michigan and Ohio who successfully raised awareness and support for the passage of concealed carry laws. It will also look at how the advent of social media opened a new space for discussion of relevant issues concerning concealed carry throughout the United States. While mainstream media became a reflection of one aspect of this discussion, social media provided an alternative platform for discussion in the public sphere. More importantly, the development of the concealed-carry discourse on internet-based social media suggests the possibility of a non-commercial medium, open to participants and ideas outside the market model.

The Michigan case study covers its concealed weapons carry reform movement beginning in the mid-1990s through its enactment in 2001, when Michigan became the 31st shall-issue state and the 43rd state allowing some form of concealed weapons carry.⁸⁴ Before 2001, Michigan had a discretionary issue system similar to that of Florida prior to its law reforms in 1987. The Ohio case study differs from both Florida and Michigan in that the state out-right banned concealed weapons carry until its concealed weapons carry legislation was signed into law in 2004, making it the 35th shall-issue state and the 46th state allowing some form of concealed weapons carry.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Jeff Dege, "Progress in Right-to-Carry," Radical Gun Nuttery, accessed June 3, 2016, [http:// www.gun-nuttery.com/rtc.php](http://www.gun-nuttery.com/rtc.php).

⁸⁵ Ibid.

A. THE MICHIGAN MOVEMENT

Many gun rights movements came from grassroots beginnings, normally stemming from grievances with discretionary systems like Florida's before its law reforms. For instance, Michigan's concealed weapons carry movement began in 1996 with Janice O'Donnell, a part-time waitress who traveled home late in the evening and felt she needed a concealed weapons permit for protection. Knowing the local sheriff usually denied permits, she applied for a permit to her county gun board when the sheriff was absent and successfully obtained her permit. Upon the sheriff's return, he insisted that she did not have a valid need for a permit and requested to have her appear before the board with the intention of revoking O'Donnell's permit. To raise awareness and support of her grievance, she purchased an advertisement in the local paper and explained her situation to the community. When the gun board convened, approximately 100 people turned up—to a proceeding that normally gathered no audience. To this significant public turnout O'Donnell attributed her success in persuading the sheriff and the gun board not to revoke her permit.⁸⁶

1. Grassroots and the Internet

O'Donnell and seven other people who attended that gun board meeting later formed an organization, known as the Michigan Coalition for Responsible Gun Owners (MCRGO), which was credited as being instrumental in concealed weapons carry reforms in the state.⁸⁷ Instead of using mainstream media to broadcast its message, volunteers set up tables at gun shows and such venues as gun shops and shooting clubs to disseminate information through handouts, bumper stickers, and one-on-one conversation.⁸⁸ Large numbers of membership

Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 145–46; Note: This information was obtained by Patrick in an interview with Janice O'Donnell on August 25, 2005.

⁸⁷ David Felbeck, "MCRGO Celebrates its Fifth Birthday," Free Republic, last modified November 23, 2001, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/576879/posts>.

⁸⁸ Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 148.

applications and donations reflected the response.⁸⁹ This allowed them to continually provide current and relevant information.

MCRGO also effectively utilized the Internet to pass information to the public. In addition to the paper newsletter, members could receive email bulletins, which covered a range of relevant issues concerning gun rights and concealed weapons carry legislation.⁹⁰ Much of this correspondence urged members and allies to contact their legislatures at strategic moments during the legal reform period.⁹¹ MCRGO's success in gaining support for concealed weapons carry legislation relied heavily on social media communication. For example, David Felbeck contributed MCRGO's growth to the creation of an email distribution list, a "virtually instant communication" network established in 1998, which allowed anyone subscribed not only to actively receive information pertaining to Michigan's gun rights, but also the ability to respond publicly or privately with any and all subscribers.⁹² David Felbeck, an Emeritus scholar at the University of Michigan and former chairman of MCRGO, offered the most complete historical account of MCRGO in a presentation given at the Scholar's Summit of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.⁹³

In an effort to maximize the use of new communication technology, MCRGO's first website went live in 1999 with a steady stream of current information.⁹⁴ By the end of 2001, the site mcrgo.org had nearly a half-million visits.⁹⁵ To expand its support, MCRGO networked and linked with more than 50 various gun and shooting clubs by providing website access and cross events

⁸⁹ Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 149.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 154–55.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁹² David K. Felbeck, "Successful Political Activism—A Michigan Case Study," Presented at the Scholars' Summit of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, November 10, 2001, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/600127/posts>.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 150–51.

postings, which facilitated quick communication across a large group of citizens.⁹⁶

MCRGO's use of the Internet, newsletters, and telephone provided an alternative means of effective communication and discussion among gun rights supporters and concealed weapons carry advocates and, according to Patrick, proved to be the foundation in expanding knowledge of gun laws and issues across the Michigan population.⁹⁷ For example, Figure 1 shows how in 1999 MCRGO advertised on its website an email distribution list that allowed anyone subscribed to receive and provide information on pro-gun topics.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Felbeck, "Successful Political Activism."

⁹⁷ Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 157; Note: Results are based on analysis of 248 articles selected randomly from stories on concealed carry in Midwestern newspapers from 1999–2004 in online data sources.

⁹⁸ "Home Page," MCRGO, website archived and accessed on Internet Archive Wayback Machine, October 5, 1999, accessed June 8, 2016, <http://web.archive.org/web/19991005065919/http://www.mcrgo.org/>.



Figure 1. Screenshot of MCRGO's Website Describing Its Email Distribution List on October 5, 1999.⁹⁹

Mainstream media was rarely used for disseminating gun rights propaganda, if at all. Instead, mainstream media focused its reporting mainly on opposition articles relating to the proposed changes to the law.¹⁰⁰ For example, Figure 2 illustrates an analysis conducted on news articles during the period that showed opposition articles were published in greater numbers.

⁹⁹ Source: "Home Page," MCRGO, website archived and accessed on Internet Archive Wayback Machine, October 5, 1999, accessed June 8, 2016, <http://web.archive.org/web/19991005065919/http://www.mcrgo.org/>.

¹⁰⁰ Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 159.

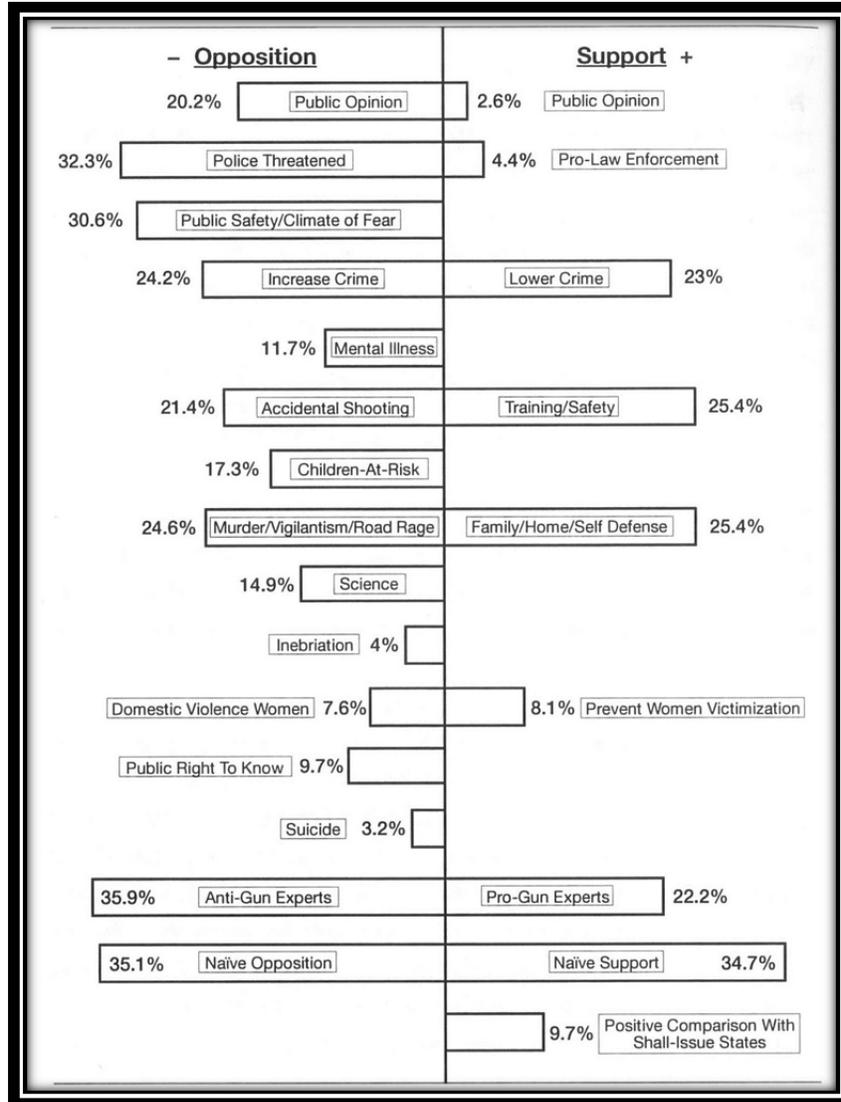


Figure 2. Themes of Newspaper Coverage of Concealed Carry: Frequencies of News Stories Containing Pro and Anti Carry Themes.¹⁰¹

MCRGO was not the only gun rights group facilitating the discussion. Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC), which disseminated legal

¹⁰¹ Source: Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 174. Note: Results are based on analysis of 248 selected randomly from stories on concealed carry in Midwestern newspapers from 1999–2004 and content analyzed. Percentages reported indicate the proportion of articles conveying particular themes, with pro-carry theme proportions on the right and anti-carry theme proportions on the left.

information on current issues relating to firearms, included at the time with numerous and hunting clubs with thousands of members.¹⁰² Today, MUCC is the nation's largest state conservation organization with more than 40,000 members and 200-plus affiliated clubs.¹⁰³ Since its founding in 1937, MUCC's mission has been dedicated to protecting Michigan's natural resources and outdoor heritage through uniting residents with a common cause.¹⁰⁴ In comparison, MCRGO had approximately 23,000 members within five years of founding.¹⁰⁵ According to Patrick, these groups

collected and exchanged their own information furiously, setting up their own alternative media, intelligence, and communication systems such that, for practical purposes, they became the only associations in the state of Michigan with in-formed, shared understandings regarding the meaning of shall issue concealed carry.¹⁰⁶

Together, these interest groups circumvented mainstream media as the voice of the public, raising awareness through alternative means of communication to pressure lawmakers into hearing their voice for changes to the law.

Both MCRGO and MUCC are separate organizations not affiliated with the Michigan Militia. According to Felbeck, a separate group, created from within the Michigan Libertarian Party and known as the Brass Roots, pushed to repeal all laws that regulated any firearms in the state and had activists associated with the militia.¹⁰⁷ Felbeck noted that by 1995, several actions by the group and militia members caused lawmakers to dismiss any of their future efforts as they were

¹⁰² Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 157.

¹⁰³ Michigan United Conservation Clubs, accessed May 4, 2016, <http://www.mucc.org/about>.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Michigan Coalition for Responsible Gun Owners, website archived and accessed on Internet Archive Wayback Machine, December 1, 2001, accessed June 8, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20021007101936/http://www.mcrgo.org/>.

¹⁰⁶ Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 147.

¹⁰⁷ Felbeck, "Successful Political Activism."

viewed as a fringe group not representing mainstream voters.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, any groups associated with the Michigan Militia were excluded from this case study.

2. Michigan Legislation and Concealed Weapons Carry Reform

MCRGO's legislative efforts to change Michigan's concealed weapons carry permit law from a discretionary to a shall-issue system began in 1998. According to Felbeck, the organization had approximately 3,500 members—all volunteers, two of whom were founding members who lobbied legislatures in their free time.¹⁰⁹ The Michigan House had a small Democratic majority that failed to bring a reform bill to a vote. Felbeck credited MCRGO's volunteers with focusing their efforts on supporting Republican candidates in closely contested districts through social media and organized town-hall meetings.¹¹⁰ By a very small margin, all three districts were won by the Republicans, which shifted the House majority.¹¹¹ Again, they were able to do this outside mainstream media using alternative public spheres such as social media and face-to-face discussions.

In the 1999 legislative session, concealed weapons carry reform bills passed through both chambers with substantial majorities; however, Felbeck explained that it was not accomplished without the substantial efforts of MCRGO volunteers.¹¹² Additionally, Felbeck claimed that in the House alone, more than 100 amendments were submitted in an effort by opposition to stall and defeat the bill; so MCRGO volunteers worked long hours with representatives to break down each amendment and determine its significant effects.¹¹³ Yet, the same

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Felbeck, "Successful Political Activism."

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ "1998 Michigan Election Results," Michigan Department of State, Last update February 22, 2016, <http://miboecfr.nictusa.com/election/results/98gen/>.

¹¹² Felbeck, "Successful Political Activism."

¹¹³ Journal of the Senate No 48, Michigan Legislature, May 26, 1999, 810–32, [http://www.legislature.mi.gov/\(S\(k1y3j3behlijysxxjiujimg\)\)/documents/1999-2000/Journal/Senate/pdf/1999-SJ-05-26-048.pdf](http://www.legislature.mi.gov/(S(k1y3j3behlijysxxjiujimg))/documents/1999-2000/Journal/Senate/pdf/1999-SJ-05-26-048.pdf); Felbeck, "Successful Political Activism."

week the bills were passed, another significant event—the Columbine High School massacre—stalled the bills from reaching the governor’s desk.¹¹⁴

Finally, in December 2000, a joint conference committee was established to form a single concealed weapons carry reform bill.¹¹⁵ According to Felbeck, at the request of the Senate speaker, members of the MCRGO, MUCC, and the NRA were asked to be part of a preliminary drafting committee.¹¹⁶ Additionally, 20 MCRGO volunteers, two MUCC representatives, and one representative from the NRA worked with lobbies in support of the bill, which passed by considerable margins in both houses.¹¹⁷ On January 2, 2001, Governor John Engler signed Michigan’s the concealed weapons carry reform bill into law, which took effect July 1, 2001.¹¹⁸

3. Michigan Summary

Michigan’s concealed weapons carry movement illustrated how a grassroots organization used social media as an alternative medium to mainstream commercial media to discuss and gain societal support in changing state firearms laws. To put the important development of social media space in perspective, David Felbeck exemplified what MCRGO was able to accomplish by stating, “Their success is all the more remarkable when examined in light of the almost universal opposition to CCW reform by the media of Michigan, in newspapers as well as in television coverage.”¹¹⁹ In just four years’ time, MCRGO managed to build and lead a community of volunteers and supporters

¹¹⁴ James Brooke, “Terror in Littleton: The Overview; 2 Students in Colorado School Said to Gun Down as Many as 23 and Kill Themselves in a Siege,” *New York Times*, April 21, 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/21/us/terror-littleton-overview-2-students-colorado-school-said-gun-down-many-23-kill.html?pagewanted=all>; Felbeck, “Successful Political Activism.”

¹¹⁵ Felbeck, “Successful Political Activism.”

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2000 Public and Local Acts: No. 381, [http://www.legislature.mi.gov/\(S\(dsotg0rb4ylkoowmhg1cn4g3\)\)/documents/publications/Mpla/2000/pa381.pdf](http://www.legislature.mi.gov/(S(dsotg0rb4ylkoowmhg1cn4g3))/documents/publications/Mpla/2000/pa381.pdf).

¹¹⁹ Felbeck, “Successful Political Activism.”

who were able to effectively communicate with state legislatures and change state laws in the face of opposition publicized by mainstream commercial media. Social media allowed MCRGO to provide relevant and timely information to a large audience all across Michigan. In turn, citizens responded by contacting their representatives and donating funds to organizations that supported concealed weapons carry reform.

B. SOCIAL MEDIA IN OHIO

Ohio represents a similar case to Michigan in that organizations utilized social media to communicate their message; however, investigative research on mainstream commercial media's coverage of Ohio's concealed weapon carry law legislation, which resulted in few articles, suggests that the discussion was overwhelmingly taking place in social media.¹²⁰ It is unclear as to why mainstream commercial media decreased its coverage of gun control and gun rights legislation in Ohio; however, it is clear that the increasing use of social media may offer an explanation for the passage of Ohio's concealed weapons carry law.

A study of two opposing social media sites in Ohio—Ohio Coalition Against Gun Violence (OCAGV) and Ohioans for Concealed Carry (OFCC)—illustrate how this new sphere became the point of contestation. According to Patrick, “informational and organizational disparities” between the two social media websites used by opposing groups in Ohio provide insight into why Ohio's laws were changed to allow concealed carry after banning its residents for nearly a century and a half.¹²¹ On one side, the OCAGV utilized a vertical, top-down approach to promoting gun control measures and advocating against gun rights

¹²⁰ Extensive searches on LexisNexis for news coverage on Ohio concealed carry legislation produced few results compared to other states' coverage. Search criteria included the following search terms: Ohio, concealed, carry, handgun, permit, and legislation covering the period between 1999 through 2005. Searches conducted between May 5–11, 2016, <http://www.lexisnexis.com.libproxy.nps.edu/hottopics/Inacademic>.

¹²¹ Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 161.

legislature in order to curb gun violence.¹²² On the other side, the OFCC utilized a horizontal community approach to promote the passage of a concealed weapons carry law in Ohio.¹²³ Both of these organizations were established in the mid to late 1990s. The OCAGV formed from a volunteer committee by the Interracial Religious Coalition and focused on decreasing gun violence; whereas the OFCC formed from a grassroots political activist organization with the aim of passing concealed weapons carry laws in Ohio.¹²⁴

1. OCAGV

Patrick's work compared the two organizations' websites over several years to identify their strengths and weaknesses in using social media. According to Patrick, the OCAGV's website offered little to no interaction and was rarely updated. While the site did offer a description of the organization, contact information, donation page, a method to input one's email address to be on OCAGV's email list, and pending gun legislation issues, Patrick described the site as a "vending machine" where information was distributed through a "limited selection."¹²⁵

A 2002 screen capture of OCAGV's website on the *Internet Archive Wayback Machine* server showed that Patrick's assessment was a very accurate.¹²⁶ For instance, many of the topics on the site were out of date, such as the information on pending legislation in which many laws had already been signed and enacted, and there was no form of two-way communication or dialogue.¹²⁷ According to Patrick, "absent entirely from the website [were]

¹²² Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 161–63.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 165–68.

¹²⁴ Ohio Coalition Against Gun Violence, accessed May 9, 2016, <http://ohioceasefire.org/content/about>; "What We're About," Ohioans for Concealed Carry, accessed May 9, 2016, <http://ohioccw.org/200907194553/what-were-about.html>.

¹²⁵ Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 161.

¹²⁶ "Ohio Coalition Against Gun Violence," Internet Archive Wayback Machine, accessed June 4, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20020925110250/http://ocagv.org/>.

¹²⁷ Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 161–63.

discussion boards, forums, podcasts, or other blog like comment features, current events, a calendar of forthcoming events, items of relevant media coverage, and essays/opinions by members.”¹²⁸ Moreover, Patrick revealed that at least up until the date of his publication, OCAGV never sent a newsletter or any correspondence via email beyond an acknowledgement message.¹²⁹

Patrick attributed OCAGV’s website strengths to its media relations information. Journalists used this contact information successfully to interview and quote OCAGV’s executive director in newspaper stories across the country.¹³⁰ For example, *USA Today* printed an article citing OCAGV’s executive director explaining how Ohio passed a pre-emption law in 2006.¹³¹ Additionally, OCAGV intermittently issued press releases during high-profile gun violence incidents, such as Virginia Tech.¹³² Apart from OCAGV’s ability to connect with mainstream commercial media, Patrick summarizes OCAGV’s ineffectiveness in preventing the passage of gun rights legislation to its informational deficiencies, stating, “OCAGV’s informational efforts ... make fleeting impressions on people for whom guns are but a transient attention issue, that is, an audience.”¹³³ In other words, Patrick suggests that the people who visit/frequent OCAGV’s site are passive or viewers that do not necessarily act upon the issue.

2. OFCC

Alternatively, OFCC’s website offered a vastly different experience from that of OCAGV’s site. Patrick describes the website as being “dynamic,” with

¹²⁸ Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 162.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 164.

¹³¹ Liz Szabo and Meghan Hoyer, “Similar Paths for Tobacco, Gun Lobby,” *USA Today*, Dec 2, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/01/31/nra-guns-tobacco-research/1859385/>.

¹³² Chad D. Baus, “So You Think Banning Guns Will End Mass Homicide?” Buckeye Firearms Association, June 4, 2007, <http://www.buckeyefirearms.org/so-you-think-banning-guns-will-end-mass-homicide>; Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 164.

¹³³ Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 164–65.

constant updating and new features for a large, active community.¹³⁴ The site offered forums, editorial works, links to other similar websites and groups, current news articles, up-to-date and pending legislation information, an upcoming events billboard, and podcasting links.¹³⁵ OFCC's website provided an online email subscription for a community of like-minded people to learn about and actively discuss issues relating to firearms and gun legislation.¹³⁶ Figure 3 is an April 2003 screenshot of OFCC's website describing its email discussion lists for the general public.¹³⁷ According to Patrick, the website offered several topics of interest with posts from visitors and members totaling nearly one hundred thousand, which showed that there was a large community actively interested in Ohio gun legislation.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 165.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ "What We're About," Ohioans for Concealed Carry, accessed May 9, 2016, <http://ohioccw.org/200907194553/what-were-about.html>.

¹³⁷ "Free Alert Mailing Lists," Ohioans for Concealed Carry, website archived and accessed on Internet Archive Wayback Machine, April 2, 2003, accessed June 8, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20030402205533/http://ofcc.net/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=13>.

¹³⁸ Patrick, *Rise of the Anti-Media*, 165.

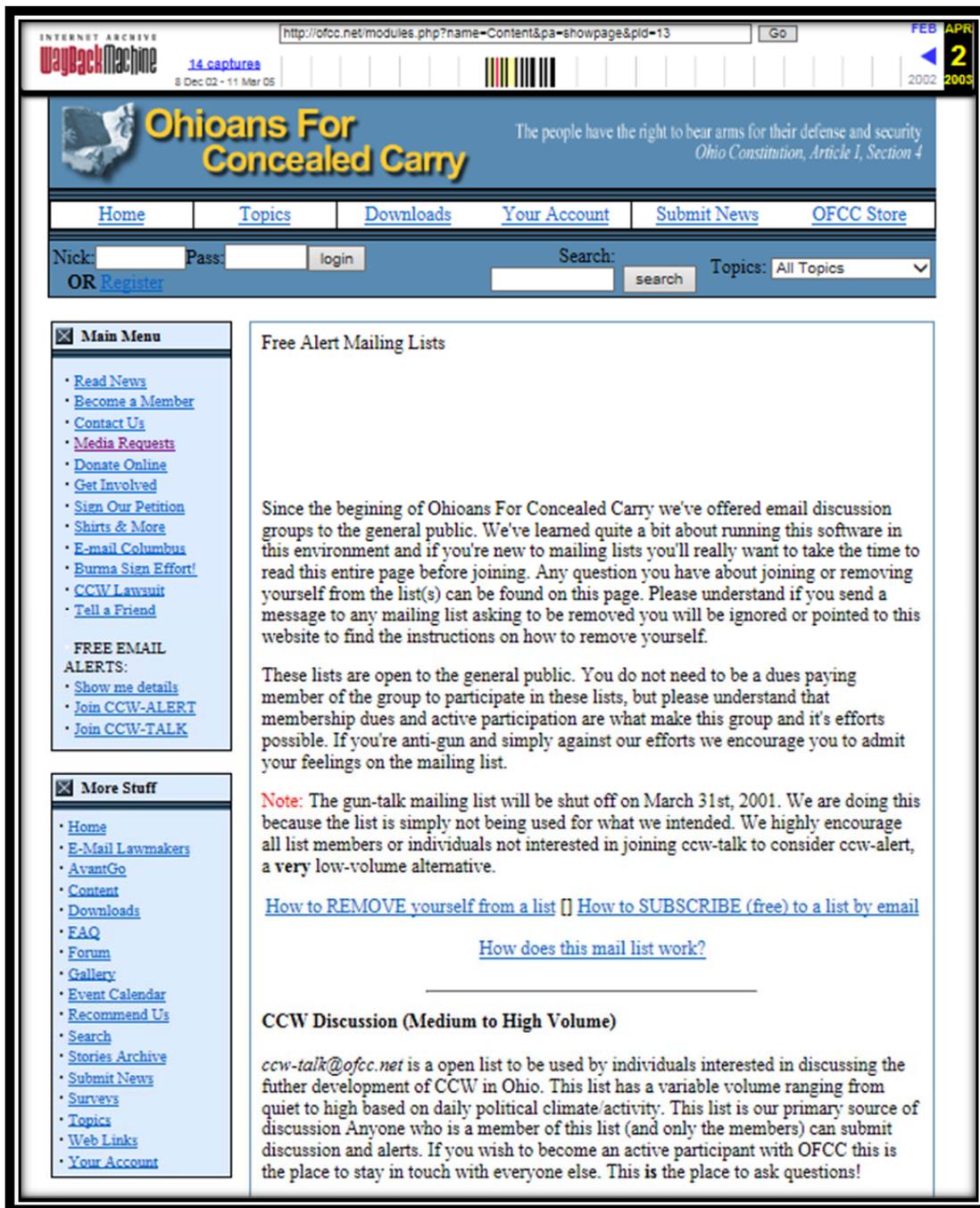


Figure 3. Screenshot of OFCC's Website Describing Its Email Distribution Lists from April 2, 2003.¹³⁹

¹³⁹Source: "Free Alert Mailing Lists," Ohioans for Concealed Carry, website archived and accessed on Internet Archive Wayback Machine, April 2, 2003, accessed June 8, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20030402205533/http://ofcc.net/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=13>.

Clearly, Patrick's description of these websites show that OFCC's website offered more features for members and visitors. Unlike OCAGV, OFCC provided current information that was relevant and timely, providing supporters not only a method to actively discuss current legislation and other topics, but also prompts to respond to representatives during legislative key proceedings. Additionally, social media allowed OFCC to deliver direct communication with its audience, which could not be disseminated effectively through mainstream commercial media. Bypassing journalists, editors, and producers through the use of social media ensured that timely, relevant, and unedited information was provided to OFCC's audience. For example, Figure 4 is a June 2003 screenshot of OFCC's newsfeed outlining actions that occurred in the Ohio legislature concerning a concealed weapons carry bill, which also contains a link to an audio stream of the full Senate debate.¹⁴⁰ Conversely, OCAGV's use of social media, which seemed to accommodate mainstream commercial media rather than an Internet audience, limited its reach toward a greater audience and hindered its communication.

¹⁴⁰ "Read News," Ohioans for Concealed Carry, website archived and accessed on Internet Archive Wayback Machine, June 26, 2003, accessed June 8, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20030626131917/http://www.ofcc.net/article1197.html>.

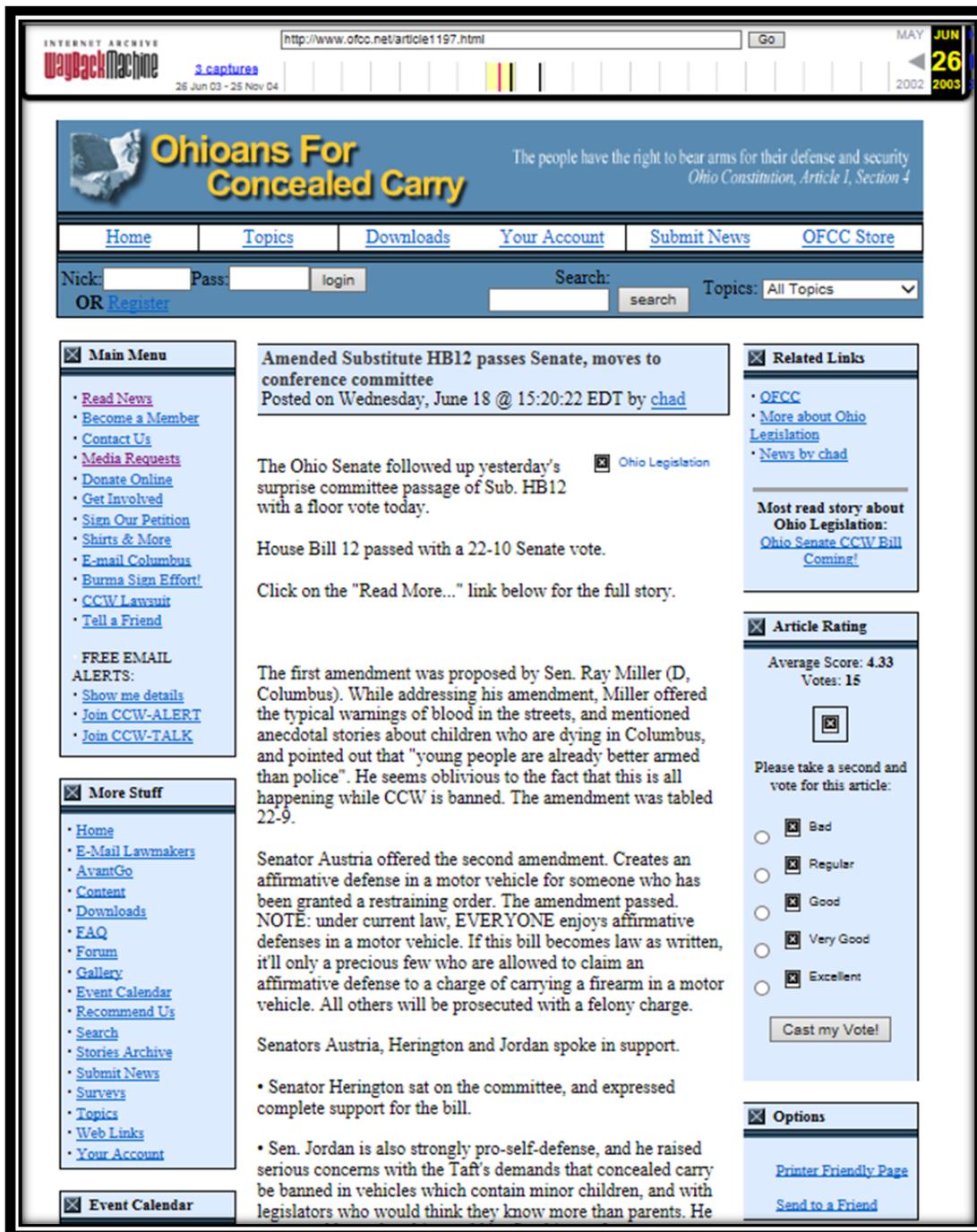


Figure 4. Screenshot of OFCC’s Newsfeed Web Page Outlining Actions That Occurred on the Senate Floor.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹Source: “Read News,” Ohioans for Concealed Carry, website archived and accessed on Internet Archive Wayback Machine, June 26, 2003, accessed June 8, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20030626131917/http://www.ofcc.net/article1197.html>.

3. Long Road to Concealed Carry

While concealed weapons carry advocates normally sought to change existing discretionary systems within their states, Ohio was unique because the state had maintained a law banning concealed weapons outright since 1859.¹⁴² It was not until 1995 that three concealed weapons carry bills were introduced in the houses, but all were either killed or not allowed to advance in the Ohio House.¹⁴³ Similar bills were introduced again in 1997 and 1999, but again met their demise in the Ohio House.¹⁴⁴ Later that year, OFCC was formed and quickly established an online presence aimed at garnering support for a new concealed weapons carry law.¹⁴⁵ Most notably, OFCC quickly established a website with a method for supporters to sign a petition designed to put pressure on Ohio's Representatives to create and pass concealed weapons carry legislation.¹⁴⁶

Another concealed weapons carry bill was introduced in the House in 2002. The bill was passed in the house and forwarded to the Senate. At that time, Governor Bob Taft added new conditions that must be met before he would sign a bill placed on his desk.¹⁴⁷ The Senate incorporated most of the changes and upon passage, sent the bill back to the House. Unfortunately, the governor

¹⁴² "Ohio Gun Rights Timeline—A Journey Towards Freedom," Buckeye Firearms Association, accessed May 18, 2016, <http://www.buckeyefirearms.org/ohio-gun-rights-timeline-journey-towards-freedom>.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ "The Petition Drive," Ohioans For Concealed Carry, website archived and accessed on Internet Archive Wayback Machine, accessed May 16, 2016, http://web.archive.org/web/20000816043839/http://www.ofcc.net/current_frame.html.

¹⁴⁷ Lee Leonard, "Police Group Drops Opposition to Gun Bill," *Columbus Dispatch*, December 4, 2002, sec. 1A, <http://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.nps.edu/docview/394535784?accountid=12702>.

indicated to the House Speaker his refusal to sign the bill as not all of his conditions were met; so the bill died at the end of session.¹⁴⁸

To place pressure on the governor and the legislature, OFCC utilized social media to raise awareness of local “Defense Walks” held throughout Ohio in protest of obstruction to concealed weapons carry legislation.¹⁴⁹ In 2002 and 2003, more than 20 “Defense Walk” protests were held in key locations such as the Ohio Statehouse, the Governor’s mansion, and in hometowns of state legislatures.¹⁵⁰ Many attendees openly carried their firearms during these legal protests to bring media attention to the gun legislation and that the alternative to having a concealed weapons carry law in Ohio is the open carry of firearms.¹⁵¹

In January 2003, another concealed weapons carry bill was introduced to the House, which was passed by a veto-proof majority in March of that year. When the bill reached the Senate committee, Governor Taft again threatened to veto the bill if it did not add even more modifications, such as locking one’s firearm when transporting within a motor vehicle and allowing journalists access to permitted individuals’ records.¹⁵² In December, both chambers passed the bill with the governor’s provisions by a margin of 25–8 in the Senate and 70–27 in

¹⁴⁸ Lee Leonard, “Concealed Weapons are OK’d By Senate; House Still Unlikely to Reconvene Unless Taft Signals Approval,” *Columbus Dispatch*, December 11, 2002, Sec. 1C, <http://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/394532163?accountid=12702>.

¹⁴⁹ “Defense Walks Make History in Ohio,” Buckeye Firearms Association, accessed May 18, 2016, <http://www.buckeyefirearms.org/defense-walks-make-history-ohio>.

¹⁵⁰ “Ohio Gun Rights Timeline—A Journey Towards Freedom,” Buckeye Firearms Association, accessed May 18, 2016, <http://www.buckeyefirearms.org/ohio-gun-rights-timeline-journey-towards-freedom>.

¹⁵¹ “Open Carry Self-Defense Walk Sunday; More Coming Soon,” Buckeye Firearms Association, accessed May 18, 2016, <http://www.buckeyefirearms.org/open-carry-self-defense-walk-sunday-more-coming-soon#>.

¹⁵² “New Report Shows Ohio Violent Crimes Could Have Been Prevented; Estimates Suggest Thousands of Needless Victims Each Year,” Ohioans For Concealed Carry, September 22, 2003, <http://ohioccw.org/files/OhioReportPR-1.pdf>.

the House.¹⁵³ On January 8, 2004, Governor Taft signed the bill into law and Ohio became the 46th state in the country to allow concealed weapons carry.¹⁵⁴

4. Ohio Summary

OFCC's efforts of placing pressure on Ohio's politicians to pass the concealed weapons carry law were substantial. An investigative look into OFCC's website archives located on the *Internet Archive Wayback Machine* server revealed numerous occurrences where organizers placed news posts covering events in the legislative houses and advised supporters to respond.¹⁵⁵ For example, in October 2003, OFCC posted a message urging supporters to contact their representatives and communicate their views to the concealed weapons carry conference committee and even facilitated the creation of letters by providing a correspondence generator on their website.¹⁵⁶ Another example is OFCC's efforts to place pressure on the governor to sign the concealed weapons carry bill into law. Shortly after both houses passed the bill, OFCC posted a message urging supporters to contact the governor's office directly and provided Governor Taft's phone number directly on its website.¹⁵⁷

Alternatively, research into OCAGV's website archives during the same period showed that the organization did not make any attempts to communicate

¹⁵³ Chad D. Baus, "Ohioans For Concealed Carry Applauds Concealed Carry Reform Passage," Ohioans For Concealed Carry, December 11, 2003, <http://web.archive.org/web/20040402053243/http://www.ofcc.net/article1633.html>.

¹⁵⁴ John McCarthy, "Taft the Sign Gun Permit Measure," *Cincinnati Post*, January 8, 2004, Sec. A1, <http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.nps.edu/news/docview/429932681/907BB029183641E4PQ/12?accountid=12702>.

¹⁵⁵ "Ohioans For Concealed Carry," Internet Archive Wayback Machine, accessed May 20, 2016, http://web.archive.org/web/19991128065608*/http://ofcc.net/.

¹⁵⁶ "House Bill 12 Conference Committee Formed," Ohioans For Concealed Carry, Archived on Internet Archive Wayback Machine October 29, 2003, accessed May 20, 2016, <http://web.archive.org/web/20031029201927/http://ofcc.net/>; "Write Your Elected Officials," Ohioans For Concealed Carry, Archived on Internet Archive Wayback Machine December 3, 2003, accessed May 20, 2016, <http://web.archive.org/web/20031203001714/http://www.ohioccw.org/modules.php?name=ALET>.

¹⁵⁷ "House Bill 12 Status—Passed In Both Chambers," Ohioans For Concealed Carry, Archived on Internet Archive Wayback Machine December 26, 2003, accessed May 20, 2016, <http://web.archive.org/web/20031220215219/http://ofcc.net/>.

with its supporters concerning the legislation. OCAGV's website only contained links to other similar organizations, a few news article links relating to crimes involving guns, and one original press release.¹⁵⁸ The website's "Action Alerts" section held four national issues that were completely unrelated to Ohio's current events involving the concealed weapons carry legislation. If any followers had been relying on OCAGV to provide up-to-date information concerning Ohio's pending concealed weapons carry legislation, they would not have known how critical it was to reach out to their representatives. Instead, gun control supporters not following any other social media site would have relied solely on local and mainstream commercial media.

C. CONCLUSION

This chapter showed two cases where the emergence of social media was used as an alternate method of communication from mainstream commercial media for both gun rights and gun control supporters. In Michigan, a grassroots organization ignored using mainstream commercial media as a reliable outlet to communicate and successfully utilized social media to lead the charge for concealed weapons carry reform by rallying supporters and volunteers throughout the state. In Ohio, a gun control organization captured a small foothold in social media but was ineffective in building a community of supporters; however, an organization aimed at pressuring lawmakers into passing Ohio's first concealed weapons carry law had overwhelming success. These examples show how gun rights supporters have successfully compiled a community of like-minded people who have changed concealed weapons carry laws throughout the United States without mainstream commercial media.

¹⁵⁸ Ohio Coalition Against Gun Violence, Archived on Internet Archive Wayback Machine December 27, 2003, accessed May 20, 2016, <http://web.archive.org/web/20050201034027/http://ocagv.net/>.

IV. CONCLUSION

A. INTRODUCTION

This thesis illustrates the development of an alternative public sphere that is more connected to the passing of gun rights laws than the traditional media, which historically represents the Fourth Estate, a crucial element of civil society. The gun rights groups were able to utilize social media to engage in discussion leading to changes in the laws; whereas, the traditional media provided minimal coverage of such organizations as shown by the cases presented in the previous chapters.

What does the disparity between prevailing media coverage (or non-coverage) of concealed-carry laws and related stories, on the one hand, and the record of these developments, on the other, say about the role and reach of the mass media in American society today? To answer this question, this thesis looked at three states that passed concealed weapons carry laws to identify where discussions on law reform were taking place. Based on the case study research method, this thesis focused on mainstream media and alternative communication mediums before, during, and immediately after law reforms were enacted. The research has important implications for democracy as it pointed to a change in the media sector and therefore, public communicative space which is important for discussion in civil society.

B. FINDINGS

Traditional media had always been considered an important medium of public discussion in a democracy and brings to fore what that society deems important. Over the past 30 years, traditional media either failed to accurately cover or minimized the public discussions that have occurred in nearly every state where concealed carry weapons reforms were passed. As such, some segments of society do not know that every state has enacted some form of concealed weapons laws.

Two hypotheses were derived from the initial research for this thesis. The first hypothesis was that traditional news media is no longer the main forum for discussions regarding gun regulations in the public sphere. The second hypothesis was that social media's growing influence on the public sphere has led to its emergence as an alternative to traditional media. To a significant extent, all three case studies validated the first hypothesis, while the two case studies examined in Chapter III validated the second hypothesis.

The Florida case study showed that mainstream media did not provide coverage of public support for the reforms. Most of the reporting cited handgun control advocates and polls reflecting support for increased gun regulations. In response, supporters ignored the mainstream media and voted for representatives that supported reforms. The Florida case study further showed that concealed weapons carry reform supporters did not utilize mainstream media to disseminate their message and that society changed state laws by circumventing mainstream media even before the advent of social media.

Similarly, the Michigan and Ohio case studies illustrated that local supporters pressured lawmakers in passing concealed weapons carry reforms without mainstream media assistance. Instead, grassroots organizations formed and established new public spheres of communication using social media. This alternative communication medium provided an unbridled communication channel between the public that did not incorporate journalists or editors who commonly take the present in mainstream commercial media. Instead, the discussion for conceal weapons carry moved to social media led by individuals and organizations associated with the issue.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS

The American public must understand where discussions on important topics occur. In other words, society needs to be aware that many discussions that influence the passage of laws and regulations are taking place outside of mainstream commercial media. Social media has become a new conduit for

discussions within the public sphere. Lawmakers, representatives, and government leaders alike are directly connected to their constituents via social media as shown in the current campaign for presidency.¹⁵⁹ As such, the American public can no longer rely solely on mainstream commercial media to accurately reflect the public sphere.

Forums and blogs originally designed to inform the public sphere of concealed weapons carry reforms have become de-centralized and have now become a forum for broader national issues. For instance, the USA Carry forums now cover topics ranging from less-lethal weapons laws to presidential politics and other law reforms, such as the transgender bathrooms legislation efforts.¹⁶⁰ These social media organizations started out targeting specific issues of concealed carry, but they have now become a forum of broader national issues. This means that many social media sites designed specifically for communicating certain issues are not only target based, but also are sites for a community to conduct discussions on a wide range of topics deemed important to the public sphere.

To be informed in today's American society, one must not rely entirely on mainstream media. Social media is now where a considerable amount of public discussion takes place. While mainstream media has recently made strides to include social media into its coverage, the type and amount of information reported is intrinsically limited based on the volume of information alone. Therefore, a person seeking to be informed about a topic should obtain information through both mainstream media and social media.

¹⁵⁹ "Hillary Clinton for President Supporters," Facebook, Last accessed June 13, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/Hillary2016/?fref=ts>; "Donald Trump for President," Facebook, Last accessed June 13, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/DonaldTrump4President/?fref=ts>.

¹⁶⁰ "USA Carry—Concealed Carry Forum," USA Carry, Last accessed June 6, 2016, <http://www.usacarry.com/forums/>.

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