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*This study explores the adoption of new media among an elite, powerful group: state legislators. The case study investigates how five information sources are used by a sample of Louisiana state legislators to meet nine different information needs. These research questions were posed: (1) What roles do the various sources available to legislators play in helping them make voting decisions, and does the importance of these information sources vary with different information needs? (2) How does new information technology fit into the information sources state legislators use in making voting decisions? and (3) Do characteristics such as the officeholder's age, tenure, and education influence how these information sources are used? The legislators in this sample indicate a preference for interpersonal communication channels, specifically statehouse insiders. They do not consider new media to be important sources for information. Their age, tenure, and education have little influence on how they use information sources.*

## Media Use and Disuse by State Legislators The Social Construction of Innovation

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**T**he state senator was young and had a reputation as a reformer out to change the set-in-stone ways of his older colleagues in the legislature. An alumnus of the mass communication program, he had agreed to speak that day before a senior-level class on politics and the media. Noticing the computer behind the desk in the professor's office, he commented wistfully, "You know, I'm going to have to learn how to operate one of those things one day." The state senator seemed unaware that he was pointing to a tool of the information revolution, a tool that has the power to bring his constituents and others closer to legislative action than ever before, and closer to the power elite in the state government than any other vehicle can. What irony, thought the professor, as he

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and the legislator walked to the classroom of students waiting to hear the senator talk about the interdependence of the media and political leaders.

The generation of this state senator and of Americans raised on television and first exposed to computers is now reaching positions of power. At the same time, the information revolution has greatly expanded the amount of information available to elected officials, provided they know how to obtain it or have it obtained for them or think it worthy of their absorption. The information itself remains much the same as that which dominated the lives of their predecessors, varying from the general, such as news from their district, to the specific, including the usual queries, supplications, and admonishments from citizens. The media through which the information arrives and through which legislators respond, however, have grown in complexity and speed: Reports may arrive via a Web page, constituent responses in e-mail, or district profiles on CD-ROM.

Ideally, legislators would avail themselves of any new medium or channel of information that could augment their knowledge of the issues they must address, the region they govern, and the people they serve. As the example of the supposedly media-savvy but computer-illiterate legislator illustrates, however, media innovation in political organizations is not always seen as urgent. This state senator engages purposively in a process of media disuse. His decision not to undergo personal training in technological innovations reflects his opinion that the primary form of information retrieval and dispersal is less important than the form through which he can attend to it. For example, e-mail is printed out by his staff, who does employ it, and given to him along with the day's paper mail. In the give-and-take of the legislative process, however, he may prefer to process information by relying on his political skills of reading various nonverbal cues available only in face-to-face conversation. His example reminds us that, as Wanda Orlikowski recently noted, although technologies are physical constructs, they "are socially constructed by actors through the different meanings they attach to them and the various features they emphasize and use" (406).

Yet, elected officials are distinct in a society in that they are the "supermanagers" who are responsible for making decisions about the regulations that govern the technology used by the rest of us: They are the overlords of communication policy. Their attitudes toward and experiential familiarity with old and new media constitute important information for understanding how that policy is made. It is impor-

tant, therefore, to gauge how traditional and new media are being used (and assessed) by political leaders. Knowledge of legislative media use and attitudes should be particularly crucial in light of the great challenge that new media pose to public policy (McChesney; Stoll; Talbott). Such knowledge would also be useful for the various other actors who work within the legislative domain: Media professionals—public relations practitioners, news reporters, database-content providers and library specialists—need to know what channels of information are preferred by elected officials. Furthermore, evaluating political leaders' media usage is important because the public has a right to know and understand by what means and with what content their elected officials draw information to make decisions; journalists should know the sources (themselves included) of political decision making so that they may cover not just the outcomes but the origins of, and steps toward, decision making; and, most obvious, political leaders should be made aware of the problems with, and prospects for, their own and their colleagues' approaches to information gathering and decision making.

This study examines and compares the importance of various communication channels in legislators' decision making. These channels of communication include established mass media (newspapers and television news), interpersonal forms of communication (colleagues and interest group representatives), and new media (computers and the Internet). We treat the state legislature as an organization that, like many others, faces the challenges of "adopting, using, and evaluating new media" (R. E. Rice 451). In addition, we are concerned with the relative uses of, types of information drawn from, and attitudes toward "old" media as well. Our goal is to gauge the patterns of use of all major media, in terms of their intensity of use and the relation of use to information-dependent tasks performed by political leaders. This case study surveys the use of information sources in the voting decisions of Louisiana legislators by posing three research questions:

1. What roles do the various information sources available to legislators play in helping them make voting decisions, and does the importance of these information sources vary with different information needs?
2. How does new information technology fit into the information sources state legislators use in making voting decisions?
3. Do characteristics such as the officeholder's age, tenure, and education influence how these information sources are used?

The survey is the first part of a three-part research project. This first part attempts to identify patterns of media use among state legislators. Future parts include personal interviews with legislators and their staffs. After refining the instrument, we hope to apply the same procedure to national political leaders.

Our premise is that the future of business and technical communication is entwined with the progress of new media technology such as e-mail and the World Wide Web. The essential question is whether the officials charged with formulating policy regarding this new technology understand and employ it.

New media technology challenges users' traditional communication skills regarding substance and style. Like an advertisement for a complex technical product, complex computer-mediated technical communication has limited audience appeal. The relationship between those who construct and communicate technical information and the technology employed to deliver it is strong (Gurak). Legislators, as political leaders, tend to be people-oriented generalists with diffuse, vaguely defined goals, not specialists trained in academic knowledge and possessing specific skills.

Rodney Rice has called for a rhetoric that helps writers develop a style that is dynamic and responsive to the changes signaled by computer-mediated communication and that will help users understand context, focus messages more clearly, and arrange material in purposeful rather than random fashion. Users' unfamiliarity with this new medium and a lack of understanding of appropriate style, syntax, and other communication conventions present barriers for effective communication. Should communication using this new technology be similar to letter writing or advertising? Is computer-mediated communication more like a news broadcast or a friendly chat with an acquaintance?

Computer-mediated communication greatly enhances the function performed by traditional mass media: to break the bonds of proximate communication where issues of time and space do not limit connections between interested individuals. Indeed, this new medium can help develop long-distance relationships via news groups (Parks and Floyd).

Questions about the roles that computer-mediated communication plays in the decision-making process of legislators are important in light of the growing symbiosis between politics and new media. The information revolution, and notably one of its many offspring, tele democracy, is in high gear in most parts of the United States.

Homepages, chat rooms, electronic town meetings, and other forms of direct linkage between the electorate and those elected are sprouting up at various levels of government, whether it be rural constituents accessing listings of local government services or the White House inviting comments from citizens via e-mail. And with more than 50 million Americans using on-line services and more joining each day, the traditional channels of communication between citizens and the political elite, channels that news media have claimed as their primary domain (Dunn; Strouse), stand the risk of being usurped by less traditional forms that provide unfiltered access to policy makers.

The adoption of this new media technology concerns the "diffusion," or acceptance, of an innovation, namely, the use of new technology for gathering and disseminating information. Individuals may play different roles in this diffusion process (Rogers). These roles range from the early adopter, who is one of the first to make use of the innovation and to mentally adapt to its consequences, to die-hard rejecters, who are not persuaded to adopt an innovation. In between are laggards, or late adopters, of various degrees, who adopt later or lag behind the adoption curve. Diffusion, however, is not purely an idiosyncratic personal choice: It is social change. In any organization the use of information is embedded in social norms that make it highly symbolic (Feldman and March). The characteristics of the social groups and the social system, or organization, are critical to the success or failure of the innovation within that organization. For example, the size of an organization and degree of interactivity among its members influence the rate of adoption of an innovation. The success or failure to adopt an innovation is often indicative of its compatibility or noncompatibility with the values, beliefs, and past experiences of the social system (Rogers).

Key players in the diffusion process are the opinion leaders. However, opinion leaders, in terms of media usage, may not be the same group as elite political leaders. In the Middle Ages, the nobility were often as illiterate as the lowest peasants (Clanchy). More recently, it was noted that President Clinton was the first president in the White House to use a computer. It is of great interest, therefore, for communication researchers to examine how and why political leaders react the way they do to the presence of media technology, especially new media, such as computers and the Internet (including the World Wide Web and e-mail), which are bringing sweeping changes to so many aspects of other organizations in society. Do these people lead public opinion about this technology but reject it for themselves?

In this examination, traditional communication research theories and questions need not be discarded. Much has been said about the role of the media in the relationship between those governed and those governing. News media are very dependent on the government for basic information and expert sources (Sigal; Soley). This dependency at times leads to manipulation on the part of government officials (Tuchman; Gans). Agenda-setting research suggests that the news media do not radically change public attitudes, but they do influence the agenda of public attention and that elite opinion leaders, most in government, set the agenda of the press (Cohen; McCombs and Shaw; Rogers, Dearing and Bregman).

How politicians use information sources to meet their information needs is, therefore, a large issue and can be analyzed in many ways. State legislators, in turn, compose a narrow but very targetable social system and thus constitute a good, albeit limited, population for this case study. They are a small, elite, powerful group who have the will and ability to shape the lives of their constituents. Moreover, previous research has shown that state legislators, who have at their disposal a wide array of sources for information, demonstrate a preference for some sources as they make decisions on complex issues that come before them for a vote (Riffe, "Comparison," "Media"). The news media, interestingly, are viewed as a less desirable source because of their adversarial nature. Previous studies have suggested that legislators tend to prefer highly specialized information such as that provided by lobbyists and expert colleagues (Bradley; Sabatier and Whiteman).

News media do play a role in providing lawmakers with information monitoring what leaders are involved in which issues and what they are thinking (Key), public opinion about issues that are coming to a vote (Dunn), and the effectiveness of lawmakers' communication to their constituents (Fenno). And newspapers are the mass media source used most often by legislators regardless of their length of time served in the legislative body (Bybee and Comadena). Statehouse colleagues, however, consistently rank first or second as preferred sources of information. Thus, the press might perform a substantial monitoring function in the political arena, but not a unique or primary role.

In this information age, where media play an important role not only in providing information to citizens and political leaders alike but also in selecting and framing that mediated reality, it is important to examine which sources of information political leaders draw on as

the basis of their decisions. Diffusion research suggests that new uses of media or the introduction of new media may be accepted or rejected largely in relation to the nature of the social system into which they are introduced.

## METHOD

Questionnaires were mailed to the home addresses of all 138 legislators in the Louisiana State Senate and House of Representatives on October 1, 1995. Eighty-four (61%) were returned, a "good" response rate according to Earl Babbie (267). The questionnaire addressed nine information needs that were adapted from a political media gratification scale developed by Steven McLeod and Lee Becker (Riffe ["Comparison," "Media"] used similar items). The scale offers a particularly useful way to explore the motivations that drive people to receive and exchange messages (Rafaeli; Morris and Ogan). The following nine information needs were addressed in the present study:<sup>1</sup>

1. to determine the state's most important issues,
2. to learn about the issues,
3. to discover what the public thinks about the issues,
4. to find out how strongly the public feels about the issues,
5. to determine what political leaders are involved with the issues,
6. to decide how to vote on an issue,
7. to gather information for debates with other legislators about the issues,
8. to estimate the likely outcomes of the legislative vote on the issues, and
9. to reinforce decisions that have already been made about an issue.

Five sources of information were explored:

1. colleagues in the legislature,
2. newspapers,
3. television news,
4. computer on-line services, and
5. interest group representatives.

Computer on-line services referred to any information that came via computer, including chat rooms, e-mail, Web pages, listservers, news groups, and search engines. Respondents indicated whether the in-



formation sources met their information needs on a three-interval scale: *never*, *sometimes*, or *often*.

A difference score for each respondent for each possible pairing was computed, and a mean difference score for that pairing for the sample was calculated. Pairings examined each of the five information sources with each of the nine information needs. Difference scores for these 90 pairings were computed for each respondent, and means were calculated. Statistical analysis (*t* test) on these means was conducted to establish significant differences between these means. This analysis revealed which information sources are viewed similarly by legislators for various information needs.

Respondents were also surveyed about their everyday use of computers. They were provided with a list of nine different computer uses:

1. for a source of entertainment,
2. for performing word processing,
3. for maintaining an office budget with spreadsheet programs,
4. for communicating with colleagues via e-mail,
5. for communicating with friends and others via e-mail,
6. for communicating with constituents via e-mail,
7. for accessing the Internet and World Wide Web and other on-line services via computer at least once a week,
8. for enjoying a computer in all aspects of life, and
9. do not use—rely on the expertise of others for computer needs.

The eighth item is a global measurement to assess the respondent's view of computer use in general. Respondents indicated whether each use applied to them *never*, *sometimes*, or *often*.

To investigate how the use of the information sources explored in this study may be influenced by characteristics such as age, tenure, and education of legislators, categories for each of these items were established and analysis of variance was conducted. Age categories were 20-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61-70, and older than 70; tenure categories included less than 2 years, 3-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, and more than 15 years; education categories were high school or less, junior/community college or less than bachelor's degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree, or doctorate or law degree.

**TABLE 1**  
**Mean Scores by Information Need and Information Source**

<i>Information Need</i>	<i>Information Source</i>				
	<i>Colleagues</i>	<i>Newspapers</i>	<i>TV News</i>	<i>Computers</i>	<i>Interest Groups</i>
Most important issues	2.58	2.26	2.12	1.14	2.13
	1	2	4	5	3
Learn about issues	2.69	2.37	2.11	1.26	2.46
	1	3	4	5	2
What public thinks	2.39	2.26	2.05	1.14	2.17
	1	2	4	5	3
How public feels	2.39	2.20	2.07	1.15	2.13
	1	2	4	5	3
What leaders involved	2.37	2.17	2.04	1.09	2.08
	1	2	4	5	3
How to vote	2.12	1.65	1.54	1.09	2.01
	1	3	4	5	2
Information for debate	2.28	2.05	1.86	1.23	2.28
	1	3	4	5	1
Outcome of vote	2.44	1.69	1.65	1.09	2.03
	1	3	4	5	2
Reinforce decisions	2.11	1.75	1.62	1.09	1.95
	1	3	4	5	2

NOTE:  $N = 84$ . The top number in each row of information needs is the mean (based on a three-point scale: 1 = *never*, 2 = *sometimes*, and 3 = *often*), and the bottom number is the ranking within that row (1 = most valued source).

## FINDINGS

Colleagues, interest group representatives, and newspapers rated first, second, or third as sources of information for all nine information needs as determined by high mean scores (see Table 1). Overall, colleagues were the most valued source of information in eight of the nine information needs. Colleagues and interest group representatives were valued equally by legislators as sources of information to use in debates with other legislators. Interest group representatives were the second-most valued source as determined by high mean scores. The mean scores for interest group representatives were second highest below colleagues in four information needs: learning about the issues, deciding how to vote on issues,

determining the likely outcome of a legislative vote, and reinforcing a decision already made about an issue. The mean scores for newspapers were second highest below colleagues in four other information needs: determining the most important issues facing the state, discovering what the public thinks about the issues, finding out how strongly the public feels about the issues, and determining what political leaders are involved in the issues. The mean scores for television news and computer on-line services rated fourth and fifth, respectively, on all nine issues.

*T*-test scores pairing each of the five information sources with each of the nine information needs revealed no significant differences between newspapers, television news, and interest group representatives in five of the nine information needs: determining what the most important issues are, learning about the issues, discovering what the public thinks about the issues, finding out how strongly the public feels about the issues, and determining what political leaders are involved in the issues (see Table 2). Viewed another way, only colleagues and computer on-line services were regarded as significantly different ( $p < .005$ ) from other sources—colleagues are perceived as highly valued sources and computer on-line services as little-valued sources. Interestingly, no significant differences existed in how legislators view their colleagues and interest group representatives for two information needs: deciding how to vote and gathering information for debates with other legislators.

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of the respondents said they never use computers as a source of entertainment, but half said they sometimes or often use computers for word processing (see Table 3). About 70% said they never use a spreadsheet program on a computer to maintain their office budget. The vast majority of the respondents claimed to never use e-mail; about 84% never use e-mail to communicate with their colleagues or with friends and others, and 89% never use e-mail to communicate with their constituents. Similarly, 88% said they never use the Internet or other on-line services. Not surprisingly, two-thirds said they rely on the expertise of others to handle the computer work in their office. Nearly half (45%) reported they never enjoy using a computer.

With regard to the use of colleagues as an information source, age and tenure significantly influence only one information need (see Table 4). Age differences are significant in how legislators use their colleagues to learn about the issues. Younger legislators (40 years old and younger) tend to rely more heavily on their colleagues to learn

TABLE 2  
T-Test Comparisons across Information Sources

Information Source Comparison	Information Need								
	Issues	Learn	Thinks	Feels	Leaders	Vote	Debate	Outcome	Reinforce
Colleagues with									
Newspapers	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
TV news	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
Computers	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
Interest groups	S	S	S	S	S	nis	nis	S	S
Newspapers with									
TV news	S	S	S	nis	nis	S	S	nis	S
Computers	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
Interest groups	nis	nis	nis	nis	nis	S	S	S	S
TV news with									
Computers	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
Interest groups	nis	nis	nis	nis	nis	S	S	S	S
Computers with									
Interest groups	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S

NOTE: S = significant difference between the two scores ( $p \leq .005$ ); nis = no significant difference between the two scores. For example, there is no significant difference between the use of colleagues and interest groups when legislators need information concerning how to vote on an issue and when gathering information to use in debates with other legislators. There is a significant difference between the way legislators use colleagues and computer-mediated communication in finding out what the most important issues are that face the state. Because of the multiple comparisons within each information type, the a priori global alpha level (.05) was corrected as follows:  $n(n-1)/2 = 5(4)/2 = 10$ ;  $.05/10 = .005$ . Pairing differences were considered significant only if  $p \leq .005$  for the computed value.

**TABLE 3**  
**Computer Use by Percentage of Respondents per Item**

<i>Everyday Use of Computers</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Often</i>
Entertainment	64.3	28.6	7.1
Word processing	50.0	20.2	29.8
Maintain office budget with spreadsheet program	70.2	17.9	11.9
Communicate with colleagues via e-mail	84.5	13.1	2.4
Communicate with friends and others via e-mail	83.3	15.5	1.2
Communicate with constituents via e-mail	89.3	10.7	0.0
Access the Internet and World Wide Web and other on-line services at least once a week	88.1	10.7	1.2
Enjoy in all aspects of life	45.2	44.0	10.7 <sup>a</sup>
Rely on the expertise of others to handle computer work in my office	8.3	25.0	66.7

NOTE:  $N = 84$ .

a. Does not equal 100 because of rounding.

about the issues than do older legislators. Legislators with longer tenure (more than 5 years) tend to rely more on their colleagues for information concerning how the public thinks about issues than do legislators with shorter tenure. Age and tenure also significantly influence how newspapers are used: Younger legislators rely on newspapers for information to use in debates more than older legislators do, and legislators with shorter tenures in their respective chambers tend to use newspapers more than their more experienced counterparts do in determining how to vote on an issue. The use of television news as an information source is not significantly influenced by any of these characteristics.

Use of computer on-line services is influenced by age and tenure as younger and less experienced legislators strive to determine how the public feels about the issues. Lawmakers ages 40 and younger and with less than 6 years experience are more likely to use on-line services than their older, more experienced colleagues. Education does not significantly influence how computer on-line services are used. Age differences are also significant influences in how legislators use interest groups to gather information for debate with other legislators. Younger legislators are more likely to reach out to interest group representatives for information than are their older colleagues. Education differences are also significant in how legislators rely on

**TABLE 4**  
**Age, Tenure, and Education Influences**  
**on Use of Information Sources**

<i>Information Source</i>	<i>Age<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Tenure<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>Education<sup>c</sup></i>
<b>Colleagues</b>			
Most important issues	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Learn about issues	4.85*	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
What public thinks	<i>ns</i>	5.47*	<i>ns</i>
How public feels	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
What leaders involved	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
How to vote	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Information for debate	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Outcome of vote	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Reinforce decision	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
<b>Newspapers</b>			
Most important issues	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Learn about issues	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
What public thinks	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
How public feels	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
What leaders involved	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
How to vote	<i>ns</i>	4.39*	<i>ns</i>
Information for debate	4.22*	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Outcome of vote	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Reinforce decision	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
<b>Television news</b>			
Most important issues	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Learn about issues	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
What public thinks	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
How public feels	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
What leaders involved	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
How to vote	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Information for debate	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Outcome of vote	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Reinforce decision	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
<b>Computers</b>			
Most important issues	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Learn about issues	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
What public thinks	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
How public feels	10.55**	4.52*	<i>ns</i>
What leaders involved	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
How to vote	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Information for debate	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Outcome of vote	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Reinforce decision	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>

(continued)

TABLE 4 Continued

<i>Information Source</i>	<i>Age<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Tenure<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>Education<sup>c</sup></i>
Interest groups			
Most important issues	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Learn about issues	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	4.06*
What public thinks	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
How public feels	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
What leaders involved	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
How to vote	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Information for debate	4.26*	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Outcome of vote	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Reinforce decision	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>

NOTE: *ns* means no significant difference exists between the various age, tenure, or education categories in how legislators use the information source for that particular information need.

a. Age categories included 20-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61-70, and over 70.

b. Tenure categories included less than 2 years, 3-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, and over 15 years.

c. Education categories included high school or less, junior/community college or less than bachelor's degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree, or doctorate or law degree. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .005$ .

information from interest group representatives to learn about the issues.

## DISCUSSION

Our three research questions addressed the role and importance of information sources used by legislators; the role information technology plays in helping legislators make voting decisions; and factors such as age, tenure, and education that may influence how these information sources are used.

The use of information technology by state legislators is remarkable for its absence, and factors such as age, tenure, and education seem to have little influence on how information sources are used. What little influence these demographic characteristics have on information gathering in general suggests that younger, less experienced legislators engage in information gathering that encompasses a wider spectrum of sources. Conversation is preferred over any mediated communication. Interpersonal sources—colleagues in the legislature

and interest group representatives—are highly valued sources of information. Mass media sources generally play second fiddle to these statehouse insiders. Computer-mediated communication comes in a distant third. In short, our legislators purposively disused mass media for some tasks and new media for almost all tasks.

For these policy makers, new information technology appears to be as abstract as the concepts of privacy, disclosure, teledemocracy, and other policy issues that this technology challenges and/or makes possible. Computers are regarded by a vast majority of these legislators as tools used in document preparation and thus should be left to support staff and others with expertise in those areas. The notion that databases, Web sites, and e-mail can be sources of information that can link them more closely with voters, legislative staff, government offices, and others has not been considered by most of these legislators. Most neither employ this new technology nor seem to understand how it may be used to fulfill their duties as policy makers and political leaders.

## CONCLUSION

This study is the first stage of a three-part research project that investigates the use of new media among elected officials. It explores how various information sources are used by state legislators to meet certain information needs. At the present time, these state legislators mostly reject the opportunities that new information technology offers and instead rely on a more trusted mode of communication that also provides a richer and more immediate source of feedback: face-to-face conversation. They engage in informed *disuse* of certain media, which may demonstrate that human perceptions of the utility of different media are, thus, a different variable than those media's actual value. As previous research suggests, managers in organizations are not necessarily rational users or choosers of media (Rice, Hughes, and Love).

On the other hand, in this case, outsider (e.g., researcher) perceptions of media utility may be unattuned to the concrete, rational reasons why these elected officials employ and do not employ technology. These legislators are likely aware that technological innovation is not without its drawbacks that might upset the balance of organizational efficiency (Tenner). Their risk aversion is heightened



by the fragility of their position—in a sense, elected officials are like companies that face catastrophic dissolution every election cycle. Among the risks they face is the loss of personal control over information. New technology makes available volumes of information that could overwhelm rather than enlighten. Most pertinent, face-to-face interaction may simply work best in achieving legislators' immediate and long-term goals such as cooperating with colleagues to fashion, to pass, and to derail legislation; generating financial support from key contributors; and communicating to constituents their *personal* engagement with local problems.

In that light, we plan to consider further the human element in media selection and use by political leaders and those who work for them. Future research should explore the relationship between state legislators and their staffs. Is there a two-step flow in place where information flows from constituents, friends, and others to a staff person and from that staff person to the legislator? If so, how well versed in information technology are staff people? How influential are they in shaping policy decisions made by their legislators? Does media use and disuse by officeholders correlate in any way with media use and disuse by their staffs? Such research should include personal interviews and on-site observation of work practices.

It is also worthwhile to consider the perceptions and actions of the constituent base. How experienced are constituents with information technology, and what channels are they likely to employ when voicing concern about an issue? What channels would they prefer if given a choice? And, of vital interest to elected officials, to what extent do potential voters positively assess their leaders in relation to their media competence? The legislator cited earlier obviously felt that no voters would turn against him if knowledge of his technological illiteracy became known. Is that true? Will it change? Will voters, or some group of voters, someday use technological literacy and eloquence as a criterion for electing their leaders?

Future research should focus then on media use and disuse in relation to the matrix of elected officials, staff, and constituency as well as other participants, such as lobbyists. Researchers should assess the choice *not* to use media as well as the choice to use them. Media disuse is not always a sign of retrograde thinking, nor is almost exclusive reliance on interpersonal communication always an archaism even in the modern workplace. As our study found, educational level was not a factor that related to the technology choices made by the respondents. In that light, we argue that media disuse can be a rational

process that, when assessed in terms of the social context of the organizational setting, actually maximizes managerial efficiency.

## NOTE

1. The nine items that addressed information needs require adjusting. Also to be addressed is the dimensionality of the items. What information needs are being described? Are the items unidimensional or multidimensional in nature? Additional research should help refine the survey instrument.

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