

Next Generation Advocacy

news. 9

Kansas House bill 2453 has caused an outbreak on social media

twitter

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The recent controversy over Kansas's House Bill 2453, or The Religious Freedoms Act, had students and citizens alike voicing their opinions over social media. They were sharing petitions and sending links to write senators, all on the web. The outcry brought to light a new trend among young people: social advocacy via the internet. It rallied more support and reached more people around the globe and within East.

The proposed bill that passed with a 72-49 vote in the Kansas House on Wednesday Feb. 13 was created in order to better protect the rights of business owners and individuals to refuse service to same-sex couples under the justification of religious freedom. For example, if a same-sex couple wanted to purchase flowers for their wedding, a florist with opposing religious beliefs could refuse his or her service without the fear of being sued. Opponents of the bill fired back that it was discriminatory in nature and unnecessary to pass. The bill reached national headlines including the pages of the New York Times and primetime minutes on CNN, before it was slated to become law. But as reaction to the bill became more heated as speculation grew, the Kansas Senate halted passing the bill, citing that they did not have a majority to try to pass it into law.

University of Kansas Journalism school professor, Douglas Ward said that this bill especially seemed to draw reaction on the Internet. Because of its controversial nature and applicability to young people, Douglas added, it was not surprising that it blew up on Twitter and Facebook as well.

"Younger people tend to be far more tolerant of different lifestyles than older people are," Ward said. "And younger people likewise are more likely to use social media."

Like other groups of young people, students at Shawnee Mission

East also took to Internet advocacy. Junior Kaedyn Diaz, President of the Gay-Straight Alliance Club at East, was active over Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr during the controversy. He realized that many of his followers and the people he was following had been misinformed about parts of the bill, so he tried understanding different opinions on the bill through his posts and tweets. He would then follow up to the replies and help them better understand the terms with the correct information.

"[I] see how people react to certain things, like 'what do you feel about this bill being passed?' and then see how they think about it and if they have been misinformed," Diaz said.

Thomas Witt, executive director of the main lobbyist group against the bill, Equality Kansas, has also had to deal with misinformation. He said a consequence of the Internet is that stories, articles and petitions can get passed around and shared without any true evidence or trustworthy sources behind them.

"Nothing spreads as fast as bad information through Facebook or Twitter," Witt said.

According to Witt, although social media seemed effective at spreading awareness about the bill, mainstream media such as newspapers in Topeka and Kansas City were able to draw attention to the subject before it exploded on the internet.

Ward teaches his journalism students to use social media as another tool to monitor what people are talking about, as well as a way to publish their own articles. They can use it to not only generate story ideas, but also to get feedback their pieces. According to him, the printed newspaper and social networks feed off of each other. While the mainstream media was the catalyst to getting people's reaction about the bill, the outcry on social media fueled even

more news coverage of it.

Although this conversation penetrated both mainstream and social media fields, it was not the first one to do so. Emotionally-charged issues, according to Ward, have created firestorms all over the globe. He said that very generation of young people rallies for change, and the goals are usually similar, but today's youth are able to reach far more people through the Internet than any generation in the past. Using the Arab Spring and other uprisings as an example, Ward said that social media has become a key tool for young people.

"Social media allows people to reach out and connect and say 'hey, look what's going on' and 'we need to do something about it,'" Ward said.

Connection, junior Evan Rose said, is one of the main reasons social media has been able to make such a big impact on him and his peers. Instead of sitting down to read the paper, he uses Twitter to catch quick headlines and better understand certain current events. He likes that it is fast, and more personal because he is able to directly follow journalists and news agencies, getting to-the-minute updates.

"I think [the Internet] stimulates interest in political affairs more so than newspapers," Rose said. "Because it's something people use and get on every day and allows them to connect with their world so I would say it's crucial and very important."

Both Rose and Diaz see social media playing a dominant role in the future of young people. According to them, their generation is already better informed and more tolerant of other lifestyles than generations preceding them.

"Social media is definitely something that provides a voice for young people," Rose said. "And in that way I would say that I have more of an effect as a kid nowadays than I would have fifty years ago."

How Other Countries Get the Word Out

ZELLO



A walkie talky-like app Used by Ukrainians to organize their protests.

Weibo



A Twitter-inspired app that was used in China when Twitter was banned

It was recently used to spread around word of the "bird-flu" in China. It was announced on Weibo that around 16,000 diseased dead pigs had floated down a river that provides water to much of Shanghai.

SMS System in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, Officials shoot out a text to a Women's husband if they see a female traveling abroad alone.

