T18P05 / From Voice to Influence: How Social Media Help Shape Public Policy?

Topic : T18 / Others
Chair : Dewulf Art (Wageningen University)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

The accelerated universalization process of new information and communication technologies and, more recently, of social media has altered, definitely, social and political relations in all of their moments -- from the public debate to the private sphere. Several studies are trying to measure the impact of this phenomenon in politics and in social collectives; or the capacity of organization of social groups from many kinds. Researches enlighten, by this reflection, the influence of social media on a "macro" level (politics, network societies, social mobilization) and on a "micro" level as well (intersubjective relations). However, there is not a wide exploration of the transformations provoked by social media in processes of an "intermediary" level, such as public policies conceived to intervene, swiftly, on the distribution of resources in a society. If the proliferation of "voices" and platforms to the public speech is a consolidated reality, even in developing countries, the same cannot be said about the "influence" exerted by social media over all the public policies cycle, since the initial sketch of the action, its application analysis and posterior evaluation. But, more than exerting influence, social media open an entirely new field of possibilities to officials in charge of public policies, who can acquire means to optimize the process from the beginning through the conclusion, reducing drastically the length of policy feedback and allowing an improvement of government actions and the accurate measurement of its impact on society's perception.

The panel "From voice to influence: how social media help shape public policy?" has, therefore, the purpose of discussing the impact and the possibilities opened by social media on public policies over all stages of its cycle -- encompassing the development of the policy, based on data and information collected on social networks, until the evaluation about the perception of the sectors affected by the policy on near-real time, contemplating, as well, the improvement methods that could be embraced by public officials. This panel intents to contribute for the consolidation of the debate about the place of internet and social media on the academic field related to public policies, giving the necessary emphasis to the transformations whose impacts tend to grow, very fast, in a nearby future, changing in a decisive way the public administration and the modern State's governance.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The accelerated universalization process of new information and communication technologies and, more recently, of social media tools has altered, definitely, social and political relations in all of their moments -- from the public debate to the private sphere. However, there is not a wide range of exploration on the transformations provoked by social media in the full cycle of public policy, especially those of "intermediary" level conceived to intervene, swiftly, on the distribution of resources in a society. If the proliferation of "voices" and platforms to the public speech is a consolidated reality, even in developing countries, the same cannot be said about the "influence" exerted by social media over all the public policies cycle – from the initial sketch of the action, its application analysis and posterior evaluation. This raises the question: how are civic relationships and political participation evolving within the context of a shifting media landscape?

The panel "From voice to influence: how social media help shape public policy?" invites submission of papers which explore the status of social media over social and political processes. Having considered the massive use of social networks as a new arena of public debate and the possibilities opened to public administration, we encourage, particularly, the submission of proposals that analyze the influence of those medias and social networks on the full cycle of public policy from elaboration, implementation, impact analysis, feedback and improvement. We also welcome proposals that introduce new methods to monitor social media, with a focus on evaluation and the amelioration of policies.

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Session 1

The publicization of social media in Cameroon: authoritarian drift and regulation of a public problem.

Yves Patrick MBANGUE NKOMBA (University of Yaoundé II, Faculty of Laws and Political Science)

Albert Richard MAKON MA MBEB (University of Douala)

On the 21st of October 2016 the Cameroonian city of Ezeka was dawned by what can now be called one of the country's deadliest railway disasters. To this exceptional tragedy, exceptional measures and remedies were put in place both within and beyond the public sector and in our case study there was an exceptional response from social media. As a matter of fact, during this tragedy social media played a very important role in creating public awareness and stirring government actions. Some of which could be seen in how: they relayed protests against the government's version on the circumstances of the tragedy, helped to mobilize for the opening of an investigation, and called for protest against the management of the crisis deemed inappropriate.

The spur caused by social media was not welcomed by state officials. So much so that it led the president of the National Assembly of Cameroon on November 10th to call on the government to systematically "hunt down" social networks, which he categorized as "real social scourges" during a public and official address. Following this address, an organized and unprecedented mobilization of ministries and public bodies proposing a myriad of solutions on how to "track down" social networks was observed. Such solutions included: blocking websites, filtering social media, systematically suspending internet access "when it is required due to circumstances", embarking on legislative reforms to, on the one hand, strengthen the power of the control Regulatory institutions, on the other hand make cyber criminality more punitive.

From the forgoing paragraphs social media was not only influencing public policy but it had gradually become a problem to the state. This paper would like to analyze the remodeling process of the Cameroonian political environment by social media, how social media was constituted as a problem (Elizabeth Sheppard 2014) and the processes by which this problem penetrated the public sphere. In this light it would be important to observe how the central powers take account of the problem posed by the social media and integrate such into the public agenda. This would be achieved through an analysis of public statements from ministry of Communication and Mass Media, ministry of posts and telecommunication, ministry of transport and Telecommunication regulatory board of Cameroon concerning the Ezeka train accident by state officials between the 21st of October till present date and interviews with strategic public agents from these institutions.

Key words: Social networks, public policies, media, public problems.

Does Social Medial Help Address Citizens' Problem? The Case of Bangladesh

Haque Ariful (Nanyang Technological University)

XU CHENGWEI (Public Policy & Global Affairs, Nanyang Technological University , Singapore)

Governments worldwide are trying to address citizens' problems more conveniently and easily. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube are instrumental in making connection between government and citizens as these enable citizens to interact with governments more directly, and take more active role in the policy-making processes. While this is widely discussed in mature, developed western democracies, less attention has been paid on developing countries. A Study shows that only 30 percent of Asian governments use social media to communicate and disseminate information to constituents (Kuzma, 2010). In the case of Bangladesh, recently social media, particularly use of Facebook has become instrumental to address citizens' problems as well as implementation, dissemination of small scale innovations in public sector in Bangladesh. "Public Service Innovation Bangladesh" – a Facebook group for civil servants has become common platform for Bangladesh Civil Service's internal communications system. This study tries to explore how social media helps to address citizens'

problems in Bangladesh. Data has been collected from Facebook page of "Public Sector Innovation in Bangladesh" and relevant Government departments' Facebook pages. Content analysis shows that social media is helping address and solve citizens' problems through Facebook platforms. In addition, social media has been facilitating small scale innovations in public service in Bangladesh, its dissemination and networking of public servants and citizens. This study has practical implications in understanding the role of social media in addressing citizens' problems, their engagement and implementations of small scale public sector innovations in Bangladesh. Policy recommendations can also be helpful for other developing countries.

Key Word: Social Media ; Citizens; Public Sector Innovation ; Bangladesh

The Evolution of Master-Frames in Agro-Food Governance: Social Media and Stakeholders Strategies

Tim Stevens (Wageningen University & Researchwur)

Dewulf Art (Wageningen University)

noelle aarts (Wageningen University & Research)

Intensive agriculture is increasingly criticised for its impact on animal welfare, the environment and public health. The complexity of these issues combined with conflicting value-based approaches, creates wicked problems in agro-food governance characterized by never-ending framing-contests. In this context, social media form an important public stage where various stakeholders communicate about agro-food issues to build support or opposition for particular policies.

In The Netherlands, two terms dominate the social media conversation about food production: megastal (factory farm) and plofkip (booster broiler). Both terms function as rhetorical device to evoke a dominant frame that problematizes the intensification or industrialisation of livestock farming. This phenomenon – the use of a single token as a trigger of a dominant frame – is still poorly understood because of the discordance between two fields of literature: master-frames and memetics. On the one hand, the literature on framing and social movements works with the concept of master-frames as interpretive schemata, but tends to neglect the power of single signifiers. On the other hand, research into the evolution of memes and hashtags looks at the spread of single tokens as cultural signifiers on digital media, but tends to neglect the changing communicative context and meaning of these signifiers.
It is thus unclear how master-frames maintain a meaning-making function in continuously changing policy contexts and public conversations. Moreover, although master-frames are considered action frames, it is unclear whether and how master-frames affect stakeholders and politicians, and how their responses – through policy and public communication – in turn affect the evolution of master-frames.
This study examines the emergence and evolution of 'plofkip' and 'megastal' in the public debate. To study the evolution of meaning we apply an implicit framing analysis using semantic co-word networks on Twitter data (2010-2016). Moreover, public responses of stakeholders and political debates and policy documents are analysed to study the influence of master-frames on stakeholders, and consequently, their influence on the course of the public debate.
Our findings indicate that both terms problematize industrial farming, but are used in different ways, reflecting two movements to contest industrial farming. Megastal is used as a container concept for largescale stables to contest public policies related to the development of factory farms, and is thus framed as an issue of public governance. Plofkip is used to refer to the broiler chicken, the animal behind the meat product, to contest companies that sell the meat of this chicken, and is thus framed as an issue of private governance. In both cases, the term is initially promoted by activist organisations and gets widely adopted; by activists, by general audiences and news media, and finally, by those actors that are held responsible (politicians and retailers respectively). Moreover, both terms are used in increasingly diverse contexts, reflecting the flexibility of meaning-ascribing functions. The responses of politicians and retailers aimed at downplaying the master-frame seem to have the contrary effect on public debates. This confirms the power of single tokens to trigger dominant frames. Any use of the term confirms the problem of intensification. The power of signifiers to trigger frames is discussed in the context of social media communication and policy-making, relating to the literature on hashtag politics and memetics.

USING MEDIA ANALYSIS TO RANK PUBLIC INTEREST ISSUES

Yasir Al Muqbel (Dubai Public Policy Research Center (b'huth))

Rama Al Jayyousi (Dubai Public Policy Research Centre (b'huth))

Fatima Alowais (Dubai Public Policy Research Center (B'huth))

The main goal of the quantitative methodology for media is to monitor and analyze any public opinion content in local media to provide a credible source of research-based information to support decision makers with the top

issues engaging public opinion.

The first step in the methodology is to monitor media content daily in local Arabic & English Newspapers, opinion-oriented radio & TV programs, along with popular social media outlets, including blogs, forums and twitter.

Any newspaper article, broadcast topic, or online conversation that expresses any form of public concern/opinion is recorded as a media content item (MCI). Each media item is summarized, given a unique ID , classified by a group. Groups are then clustered to formulate main issues/trends . A set of identifying properties such as medium type, problem impact indicator (PI)* and sentiment code** and public engagement measure are assigned to each MCI. Once collection period is completed, an automated ranking process runs reports to sum the problem impact values by content group and ranks the top issues for that duration..

*The paper will introduce the "Problem Impact" factor : The problem impact is a composite indicator includes the population affected, medium audience, MCI presentation and public response.

**We will also review the sentiment Code of each item: Each media item has a tone value where +1=positive, 0=neutral, and -1=negative representing the tone of the opinion writer or speaker. Since the Media item Tone is represented as a number the aggregate of the tone is used to reach the tone of the groups as well as the issues.

The paper provides a methodology to rank public opinion to enable the policy maker to make priorities, evaluate, enhance or introduce new public policies.