P06 / Digital Social Media in Policymaking Process

Topic : POLICY, POLITICS AND POLITICAL REGIME

Chair : Mireille Manga (International Relations Institute of Cameroon (IRIC), University of Yaoundé II)

Second Chair : Estelle Etoh Ekwoneng (Cercle de Recherches sur l'Afrique et les Enjeux Contemporains)

Third Chair : Michel Romain Awono Mballa (University of Douala)

Fourth Chair : Oluwasegun David Yusuf (University of Pretoria)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Is there any way social media can influence the policymaking process or contribute to policy change? How do politicians and citizens use social media to transform policies or control the policymaking process? These are some of the questions this panel intends to answer.

Digital social media are defined as online technological platforms which coexist with "concrete" public spaces (Chambat, 1995) controlled by governments. Unlike Habermas' definition of public space, we extend the definition of public space to "common space", a place of "connection" where political power comes to realise (Arendt et al., 1995, pp. 7–8; Zittoun, 2013). Additionally, public spaces operate as strategic tools used by politicians and their public struggling to structure policies, transform them or control their normative orientation. Based on constructivist and pragmatist perspectives of policy studies and policymaking process, we define public policies as sets of interactions created by governments' outputs and effects on their publics who struggle to change or transform the policies using deliberative public and private spaces over time (Zittoun, 2013; Durnovà, 2019; Fischer, 2009; Weible, 2019; Edimo, 2021).

The public policy literature identifies several stages of the public policymaking process (definition of the problem, formulation of solutions, agenda-setting, implementation, evaluation, etc.). Many contemporary approaches to policy studies also highlight subjective, intersubjective and pragmatist policy processes, including enunciation, formulation of the problem, planning, expertisation, and advocacy as social and political practices and activities that structure public action. They have also offered new perspectives on which to rely to enhance the study of domestic policy processes and their interactions with international or different stages of the transnational deliberative policymaking process (see, for example, Edimo, 2021).

Since the works of Christopher Hood & Helen Margetts (Hood & Margetts, 2007), very few studies have focused on the role of digital technologies in transforming public action, particularly with regard to the ability of governments' publics to use and disseminate flows of information; government capacity to continue to control citizens’ behaviours, and the sociopolitical structure of processes of government, etc. While it is well known that government activities affect the citizens' behaviours, how they change according to contexts or environment where they operate.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites papers that explore the relationship between digital social media and policymaking from various perspectives and contexts. Authors may examine different stages of public policy, including agenda-setting, policy formulation, and implementation. Topics of interest include policy advocacy, contestation, governance, environmental politics, climate change, migration governance, migrants' rights, and employment issues.

References

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Session 1

Friday, July 4th 16:00 to 18:00 (A5)

How is climate change discussed in Nepali social media? A Discourse Analysis

Sudeep Uprety (Prince of Songkla University)

Climate change is posing an enormous challenge to socio-economic and environmental wellbeing, globally. The Climate Risk Index statistics shows that Nepal falls under the ten most affected countries in the world. Prioritization of media stories through front page coverage using big-size images, cartoons, and provocative headlines makes a significant difference on how incidents are perceived and re-prioritized. When social media platforms deliberately prioritize a particular incident, it results in agenda-setting or otherwise public debates will be centered around only particular perspective.

Though the role of social media in climate change messaging has been understood in academic and public spheres, limited studies have been conducted and published, especially in the context of Nepal. Most of the coverage has been confined to direct association with rapid onset of disaster and less attention towards whether and how sustainable energy utilization can be promoted.

A qualitative study was conducted following in-depth review of the social media posts and audience interactions using Critical Discourse Analysis method. Likewise, key informant interview and focus group discussion tools were also used to understand the coverage frequency and pattern, document perspectives of the media professionals and journalists.

Study findings highlight social media interventions focus on behavior change communication than media advocacy; lack of innovation scope in funded media projects; absence of empirical research on processes of depoliticization regarding climate change in public and media discourses; lack of ideological analysis of climate change coverage; lack of proper distinction on journalistic take on climate change as incidental event or structural development. The study recommends for comprehensive study of social media interactions on climate change in Nepal particularly through framing and factor analysis to identify reasons and incentives for certain media coverage trends when it comes to covering climate change.

How Hashtag Activism Informs Policymaking: Digital Counterpublics in Indonesia's Omnibus Law Debate

Calvin Wijaya (University of Melbourne)

Background: Hashtag activism has emerged as a global phenomenon within digital public discourse, extending its influence to the realm of public policy. Given the wealth of data it generates, understanding the characteristics of hashtag activism that engages with policy issues presents a valuable opportunity to inform evidence-based policy processes in the era of "cliquepolitik," despite the challenges posed by its often "rebellious" and "messy" nature. **Gap:** However, there remains a gap in the attention given by policy scholars and researchers to conceptualising the features of policy-related hashtag activism, as well as in exploring how the data derived from it can be effectively applied as evidence for practical policy development. **Aim:** The main objective of this paper is to demonstrate how the rebellious and messy discourse within hashtag activism can serve as a potential form of evidence for policy process. **Method:** In achieving so, this study analysed hashtag of the year 2020 "#GagalkanOmnibusLaw" ('FailTheOmnibusLaw') on Twitter (now "X"), which was formed by digital counterpublics during the formulation of controversial Job Creation Bill in Indonesia. A total of 14,191 tweets containing 189,175 words were successfully collected. Based on the postpositivist paradigm and Fischer's "argumentative turn",

this study applies corpus-assisted discourse analysis by integrating corpus linguistics (CL) with the dialectical-relational approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA). **Key findings:** The application of the methods resulted in a “structured discourse” that was categorised into four types: relational, substantial, normative, and procedural. Relational discourse reveals the power dynamics between policy actors (government, oligarch, and labour). Substantial discourse highlights the objections of digital counterpublics to specific points within the policy. Normative discourse uncovers the underlying motives behind the policy’s formation. Procedural discourse exposes the unfair decision-making processes involved. **Discussions:** This study presents at least three implications worthy of discussion. First, based on the assumption that a hashtag is not merely a “medium” but rather an “actor” in itself, this study proposes that a hashtag can act as an “agent of policy problematisation,” with unstructured and contentious characteristics that often leading to dissent. Second, drawing on Hendriks’ concept of a “mixed discursive sphere”, this study proposes the role of the policy analyst as a “structuring agent,” bridging the digital counterpublics sphere (with its messy and contentious nature) and the administrative sphere (which is rational and technocratic). Third, based on the researcher’s experience in analysing the data for this study, it is proposed that the synergy of corpus linguistics (CL) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) be employed by policy analysts to structure the messy discourse of hashtag activism, positioning the hashtag as credible evidence to inform the policy process.