P228 / Digital environments, social media, and health: regulatory challenges and interdisciplinary policy perspectives

Topic : Interest Groups/Lobbying

Chair : Nancy Karreman (University of Cambridge)

Second Chair : Benjamin Hawkins (University of Cambridge)

Third Chair : Kristina Kim (University of Edinburgh)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Digital spaces have posed significant regulatory challenges to governments since their inception, drawing attention from policy scholars and political sociologists among others. The advent, and rapid proliferations, of social media platforms have given rise to both significant policy challenges and an explosion of scholarly interest, including the need to mitigate consequences for social cohesion, democracy and health.

Regulating social media, and in particular its harmful consequences for the health of children and young people, has become an increasing priority for policymakers in jurisdictions worldwide. Australia took the most significant steps to regulate social media in December 2025, banning the use of social media for children under 16. This was closely followed by similar guidance in Brazil (March 2026), Indonesia (March 2026), and Malaysia (June 2026). Restrictions have also been announced by the European Commission, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK, among others.

The rationale for these bans is often framed around protecting children and young people who, an increasing body of research evidence shows, experience the most significant harms from social media during a sensitive developmental period (Purba et al. 2026). However, policy responses to online harm cannot remain limited to children. Indeed, scholars have pointed to the need to consider social media as an important determinant of health across the life course (Zenone et al. 2023).

The burgeoning literature on the commercial determinants of health (CDoH) (Gilmore et al. 2023) and corporate political activity of health-harming industries (Ulucanlar et al. 2023) highlights the role that commercial actors – including both social media companies and the businesses that use these platforms to advertise – play in influencing policy debates and outcomes, and in shaping public perceptions of their platforms and the ways these should be regulated. However, our understanding of social media platforms as a CDoH remains underdeveloped and requires additional attention from scholars of political science and public policy.

The aims of this panel are to foster interdisciplinary exploration of the policy problems that are generated by and in online spaces, and the attempts by commercial and other political interest groups to frame policy debates and shape regulatory outcomes.

References

Gilmore, Anna B., Alice Fabbri, Fran Baum, et al. 2023. ‘Defining and Conceptualising the Commercial Determinants of Health’. The Lancet, Commercial Determinants of Health, vol. 401 (10383): 1194–213. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(23)00013-2.

Purba, Amrit Kaur, Mark Petticrew, S. Vittal Katikireddi, Jai Mooker, and Martin McKee. 2026. ‘Adolescent Social Media Restrictions: Are We Missing the Bigger Picture?’ Analysis. BMJ 394 (July): e100084. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2026-100084.

Ulucanlar, Selda, Kathrin Lauber, Alice Fabbri, et al. 2023. ‘Corporate Political Activity: Taxonomies and Model of Corporate Influence on Public Policy’. International Journal of Health Policy and Management 12 (1): 1–22. https://doi.org/10.34172/ijhpm.2023.7292.

Zenone, Marco, Nora Kenworthy, and Nason Maani. 2023. ‘The Social Media Industry as a Commercial Determinant of Health’. International Journal of Health Policy and Management 12 (Issue 1): 1–4. https://doi.org/10.34172/ijhpm.2022.6840.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Given their enormous power over both digital content curation and political power, social media platforms are a deserved focus of scholarly attention. Public health scholars have outlined the multiple detrimental impacts on health and wellbeing, particularly on children and young people during a sensitive developmental context. However, these calls for regulation have not generally engaged with scholarship from political science and public policy. This has led to insufficient consideration of commercial influence over social media regulation, including by social media companies themselves, as well as the political and social consequences of this influence. This includes their function both as platforms for marketing and sales of health-harming products and sources of weakening trust and consensus over the role of health institutions as well as being powerful corporate influencers of politics and policy.

We aim to prompt interdisciplinary dialogue and engagement with these challenges. To this end, we pose the following questions for the panel to consider:

1. What are the key, emerging policy debates and proposals around the regulation of online spaces in relation to health?

2. How do the contours of these debates, the framing of policy problems and their proposed solutions differ across policy contexts and over time?

3. How do the debates about social media as a CDoH replicate or differ from the wider policy debates in relation to social media?

4. Who are the key (e.g., commercial, institutional, advocacy and grassroots) policy actors engaged in these debates? How do they seek to influence policy process and organise politically?

5. What concepts and theories from political science and policy studies could usefully be deployed to understand and explain these processes within CDoH?

We welcome both empirical and theoretical papers focusing on the governance of social media platforms and related topics like health misinformation. Papers may be comparative or focus on a single case study, especially where cases are used to reflect on broader dynamics and implications for the field. We particularly welcome papers that are conceptually or empirically innovative, bringing a new approach or focussing on a neglected topic within the context described above.