P84 / Nothing new under the sun? Continuity, adaptation, and transformation of policy-making theories in the digital era

Topic : Policy Process Theories

Chair : Chloé BERUT (Sciences Po Grenoble)

Second Chair : Sabine Saurugger (Sciences Po Paris - Centre d'Etudes Européennes (CEE))

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Digitalization, understood as the transformation of human activities through the use of digitized information and information technologies (Frenzel et al. 2021), is now ubiquitous, with profound effects on policy-making dynamics. First, digitalization has provoked the emergence of new policy areas to regulate, from online commerce to hate speech on social media, to the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in sensitive domains. Beyond the creation of these new sectors, digitalization has also transformed many “traditional” sectors, where digitalized instruments now operate side-by-side with analogue or real-life tools. For instance, in healthcare, in-person consultations coexist with the growing digitalization and sharing of health data. In this context, policy-making in the digital era does not only refer to the regulation of new sectors, but also to the use of new, digitalized policy instruments by public authorities. Furthermore, digitalization has been accompanied by the emergence of new actors in the policy process, such as firms known as “tech giants”, digital rights activists, or even regular citizens. whose voice can now be channelled through various online consultations. Last but not least, the timing of policy-making has changed, digitalization has led to a spectacular acceleration of digital availability of information and disinformation that creates pressures on decision makers and experts.

In view of these multiple transformations, a crucial question arises: are current policy-making theories equipped to integrate these changes in a systematic way? Or, in other words, does digitalization create new patterns in policy-making dynamics, and are these patterns adequately grasped by the theoretical lenses researchers use today? Answering this question is particularly challenging, as transformations induced by digitalization are multifold and operate simultaneously in varied sectors. As a result, digitalization-related dynamics are most of the time tackled through sectoral approaches, preventing the production of more general accounts of the specific dynamics generated by this phenomenon (Bérut 2026).

In this light, the goal of this panel is to gather researchers interested in reflecting on how the theoretical approach they use might need to adapt (or not) to the digital age. It will question the possible cross-sectoral nature of changes induced by digitalization, as well as the way to integrate these peculiarities within policy-making theories. In doing so, it will ask whether existing theoretical approaches can be applied as they stand, need to be adapted, or should be fundamentally transformed to account for policy-making in the digital era. By bringing together scholars working on different sectors, levels of government and theoretical traditions, the panel aims to move beyond the current fragmentation of research on digitalization and policy-making, and to contribute to a cumulative research agenda on the topic.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel welcomes both theoretical and empirically-informed papers. All research traditions and interdisciplinary approaches are welcome. The papers submitted may concentrate on any government level (local, regional, national, European Union, international organizations) and any policy sector concerned by digitalization.

Whether theoretical or empirical, each contribution must provide an explicit reflection about the theoretical approach and/or methods used and their adequacy for studying policy-making in the digital era. In addition, contributions may address one or several of the following topics:

Policy sectors: Adopting a sectoral approach in public policy analysis is often implicit, even if some theories have gone further in theorizing this aspect (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier 1994). Yet, because of its ubiquity, digitalization puts this perspective under pressure: while new, digitalized and by nature cross-sectoral domains emerge (AI, data protection, platform regulation…), digitalization also affects already existing, well-entrenched policy sectors (health, education, security, energy, transport…). Contributions that reflect on the (non)-centrality of policy sectors in research design, and on how to analyse transformations in

policy-making dynamics in this dual context are particularly welcome.

Power games: With digitalization, new actors with specific characteristics have emerged (tech giants, digital rights activists, AI experts…), while others are redefined in new terms (platform states), opening avenues for new ideas and power games (Saurugger 2013). Yet, between the overarching theories that predict either an unprecedented dominance of platforms (techno-feudalism, Durand 2020; Varoufakis 2023), or a new form of control by states (digital sovereignty, Pohle & Thiel 2020), policy research accounts of these transformations tend to display more nuanced and contrasting results about power reconfigurations in the digital era, questioning the usual boundaries between public and private spheres. Contributions that address the nuanced transformation of power relations in this context, as well as the conditions under which such transformations operate, are welcome in this panel.

Digital instruments: The digital transition is accompanied by the creation of new devices and tools that may be used by public authorities in the design of policies (Halpern et al. 2026). Such instruments are not neutral. First, introducing digitalized instruments means introducing new savoir-faire and practices in policy-making. By doing so, the very processes of policy-making and governance arrangements may be transformed in order to integrate these new practices, thus redefining the relationships between public actors themselves and the way they interact in various levels of government. Second, the digitalization of instruments is likely to affect relationships between public authorities and citizens, reinforcing the states' capacities to exert control "at distance". This panel welcomes papers on the transformations induced by digitalized instruments, whose study raises specific methodological challenges, as it requires a deep technical understanding of how these tools are crafted.