P58 / The Transformation of Policy Process under Digitalization

Topic : Policy Change/Continuity/Dynamics

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Digitalization is transforming not only the means by which citizens and stakeholders participate in policymaking, but also the venues in which policy interactions take place. Traditionally, much citizen participation and stakeholder engagement has been organized around geographically bounded communities and administrative jurisdictions. Digital technologies, however, may facilitate the emergence of forums organized around specific policy problems, issues, and interests that cut across conventional territorial and institutional boundaries. Online platforms, civic tech initiatives, and issue-specific digital networks now allow geographically dispersed and institutionally unconnected actors to deliberate, share information, and coordinate action on common problems.

This transformation raises important questions for the study of policy processes. How does digitalization affect the formation, structure, and evolution of policy forums? Under what conditions do issue-based forums emerge and persist? How do actors participate in multiple forums simultaneously, and how do interactions among these forums shape policy coordination, learning, conflict, and change? Moreover, does digitalization create genuinely new policy venues, or does it merely reproduce existing institutional and political structures in a new technological environment?

These questions matter, first, for theory. A growing body of policy process research, including the Ecology of Games Framework (Lubell 2013) and the literature on policy forums (Fischer and Leifeld 2015), conceptualizes governance as a system of multiple interdependent decision-making venues. Yet these frameworks have largely been developed and tested in settings where forums are defined by jurisdictional, sectoral, or resource boundaries, such as regional environmental and water governance. Whether their core assumptions about forum boundaries, actor participation, and inter-forum spillovers hold when venues are constituted digitally and organized around issues remains an open empirical question. Digitalization therefore provides a critical test case for refining, extending, or challenging existing theories of the policy process.

Second, these questions matter for practice. Governments in many countries are investing in digital participation platforms and collaboration with civic tech communities, often on the assumption that digital channels broaden and deepen participation. Understanding how such channels reshape the configuration of policy forums, and whether they connect to or bypass formal decision-making institutions, is essential for assessing their democratic legitimacy and effectiveness. At the same time, digital forums may privilege actors with greater resources, technical skills, or network centrality, reproducing rather than mitigating existing inequalities.

Finally, the panel seeks to foster comparative dialogue. Administrative traditions, central-local relations, and levels of digital government maturity are likely to condition how issue-based forums emerge and interact with territorial institutions. By bridging theories that conceptualize policymaking as taking place across multiple, overlapping venues of interaction with empirical studies from diverse national and policy contexts, the panel aims to identify the conditions under which digitalization generates new policy venues and to clarify how the architecture of policymaking is changing in the digital age.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites theoretical and empirical papers that examine how digitalization transforms the forums, networks, and institutional arrangements within which policy processes unfold. We are particularly interested in research investigating the emergence of policy networks organized around specific issues and policy problems rather than traditional geographic boundaries. We welcome submissions employing the Ecology of Games Framework (EGF), as well as other policy process theories and analytical approaches that help explain the formation, interaction, and evolution of multiple forums.

Relevant topics include, but are not limited to:

The emergence and evolution of policy forums mediated by digital technologies

The shift from territorially based to issue-based policy networks
Actor participation across multiple policy forums and arenas
Interactions among policy forums
Policy learning, coordination, and conflict across multiple forums
Relationships between formal government institutions and digitally mediated policy arenas
The formation, persistence, and dissolution of issue-based forums
The effects of digital forums on policy design, implementation, and policy change
Applications and extensions of the Ecology of Games Framework in digital governance
Comparative analyses of digital and non-digital policy forums
Methodological approaches for identifying and analyzing multiple and overlapping policy forums
We especially encourage submissions that use empirical cases to assess whether existing policy process theories adequately capture emerging forms of digitally mediated policymaking. The Ecology of Games Framework, for example, offers a useful lens for analyzing how actors navigate and participate in multiple policy forums, and how relationships among these forums shape policy processes and outcomes. Beyond this framework, we welcome research concerned with changes in policy networks, institutional arrangements, and policy domains in the context of digitalization, as well as with the emergence of new forms of participation and governance.

The panel also welcomes work that critically examines the limits of digitalization. While digital technologies may enable policy networks to transcend geographic boundaries, they may also reproduce existing inequalities, institutional constraints, and patterns of political power. Submissions that examine the conditions under which digitalization does—or does not—give rise to new policy forums are therefore particularly valuable.

Through dialogue among diverse theoretical and empirical approaches, this panel seeks to develop a clearer understanding of whether digitalization is transforming not only the instruments of participation but also the structure and dynamics of contemporary policy processes.