

## **The role of social media in policy processes**

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## **1. Introduction**

The rapid penetration of social media in society has increased the possibilities for citizens to raise their voices, and to gain political attention. Citizens use social media to strategically frame their demands, and to mobilize people around these frames (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012). They use social media to explore and organize new forms of alternative knowledge that challenge the knowledge base that is used by policymakers (Dorsman et al., 2015). As a result, public policymakers have increasingly to deal with the mobilization, framing and frame-alignment potential of social media. However, policymakers also use social media for new forms of solicited participation for citizens and stakeholders in policy processes. An example is crowdsourcing, by which knowledge is gathered from the general public in an open call for anyone to participate in an online policy task (Aitamurto & Landemore, 2014, 2015).

This chapter explores whether and how social media provide a new opportunity structure for citizens, in unsolicited and solicited forms of public participation, to influence policymaking. Do they change the structure for gaining access to the domains where proximate policymakers fulfil their tasks? Do social media enhance citizens' discursive power in terms of frames, arguments and knowledge? Public policy processes are based on shared understandings about the structure of problems ('problem finding'), and ways of settling or domesticating them ('problem solving'). We adopt Hoppe's concept of 'problem structuring', which connects problem finding and problem solving, and refers to the search and evaluation of competing problem representations. Problem structuring involves analytical as well as political activities (Hoppe, 2010: 27). Moreover, it involves the participation of citizens and other, more proximate political players. Our starting-point is the expectation that social media influences the opportunity structure for political mobilization. However, as noted by Hoppe (2010: 45), it is far from clear "whether these new political communication channels provide functionally equivalent mechanisms for exerting some control on proximate policymakers", in comparison with the traditional indirect mechanisms of representative democracy and interest group representation. This, in turn, raises the issue what the normative implications of social media-enabled citizen participation are for the democratic institutions of the polity.

The central question of this paper is: How does social media usage by governmental actors and citizens affect the processes, by which shared understandings about societal problems and policy solutions are generated, contested and sustained? More specifically, we will investigate (1) how social media usage affects the opportunity structure for participation in policymaking and (2) how these effects can be assessed in terms of democratic legitimacy.

This chapter presents a theoretically informed overview of insights from four cases, three of which have been discussed in other publications (Bellers et al., 2011; Bekkers et al. 2011a, Bekkers et al. 2013, Aitamurto & Landemore 2014, 2015). The framework for the selection of these cases encompasses both unsolicited and solicited forms of citizen involvement. In the next three sections, we outline our theoretical framework. In section 5, we introduce our conceptual model and research design. In section 6 we present a description and analysis of the cases, followed by a concluding analysis in section 7. In section 8 we present our conclusions.

## ***2. Policy processes: puzzling, powering, participation***

With regard to the governance of wicked problems in policy processes, problem structuring plays a crucial role: “Domesticating a wicked problem means structuring it in such a way that it becomes fit for (partial) solutions, or settlements” (Hoppe, 2010: 15). Three perspectives are of importance here. Firstly, problem structuring depends on ‘puzzling’ or analysis as cognitive support for authoritative policy choice. This involves the search, analysis and evaluation of competing problem representations and framings, with a view to their possible integration (Hoppe, 2010: 27). However, problem structuring is also an essentially political activity and related to the exercise of power. It involves the struggle between divergent views on what the problem is about, with a view to an “at least political plausible choice of an authoritative problem definition” (Hisschemöller and Hoppe, 2001; Hoppe, 2010: 43). Thirdly, problem structuring depends on participation, “on who is included or excluded from having a voice in the puzzling; and whose resources and connections create what weight and influence in the powering” (p. 18). Traditionally, citizens are included in the rather distant role as voters, and are indirectly present via interest group representatives. Citizens also engage in political action to voice their demands and concerns. Interest group representatives, other institutional stakeholders, media actors and elected politicians fulfill all kinds of intermediary roles. Together with civil servants they can be seen as more ‘proximate’ players in the policy game. ‘Problem framing’ plays a crucial role in these processes. ‘Frames’ are interpretive schemes, which generate broad orientations and viewpoints towards a problematic situations. Based on the concepts indicated above, we have integrated an analytical, political and cultural perspective on policymaking (Bekkers, 2015).

## ***3. The impact of social media usage on policy processes***

The media have a number of resources with which they can influence agenda setting and other policymaking processes. Street (2001) distinguishes three forms of power, which are exercised by the traditional mass media. His account can be used for the characterization of the power potential of social media. A first form of power that the media have is access power. Access power refers to the way in which mass media controls the range of voices or interests, thereby using various formats and media. The kind of media used creates specific opportunities and barriers to actors seeking to advance their ideas and frames, thereby influencing the likelihood that these ideas will gain access to a larger public (Street, 2001). Secondly, mass media have power that is related to the idea that the way people act is conditioned by their knowledge and information, and in particular by the frames they use. The media help individuals to pick up particular versions of reality, which they use to construct their problem definitions and demands. The power of the media is thus primarily discursive with regard to its potential for creating specific frames and communicating them to other actors, with the possible result of aligning frames. It should be noted that the source of discursive power is not so much the medium itself as the intermediaries who provide the information and images, as well as the people who use and ‘consume’ them (Street, 2001). Third, media power can also be defined in terms of resource power. Resource power refers to the way in which media organizations can affect the actions of states and governments in terms of their economic and bargaining power. Governments need the media industry for the delivery of infrastructural services and other valued goods (Street, 2001: 236).

The specific power potential of Web 2.0 technologies potentially changes the opportunity structure within which individuals seek to attract political attention. Web 2.0 has also been referred to as the 'social Web', as its content can be generated through interaction between users, as well as through the collective intelligence of users, which is based on their communications (O'Reilly, 2005; Boulos & Wheeler, 2007; Chadwick, 2009). In Web 2.0 environments, users can take up roles that go beyond passive consumers of content, functioning instead as co-producers and co-creators. Web 2.0 allows these connections to occur instantly between many people at the same time and in different places. Flexible, self-organized networks of collaboration emerge and facilitate collective learning, in which resources, knowledge, experiences and contacts are shared through the interactive linking potential of these technologies (Bennett, 2003; Bekkers, 2004). These characteristics may have important consequences for the power potential of Web 2.0. In terms of access power, social media applications make it relatively easy to be linked into a social network. The loosely organized contacts in such a network can be mobilized towards a specific goal with low interaction costs. Web 2.0 technologies facilitate a scale shift that makes the organization of collective action, with large numbers of participants, more efficient (Chadwick, 2009: 32-33). With regard to discursive power, many-to-many-communication facilitates a rapid process of frame-alignment, while the prominent role of images, sounds and other visualized experiences can help to frame issues. In terms of resource power, Web 2.0 offers citizens the possibility of co-producing relevant content. Traditional media usually control the messages that are broadcast. The infrastructure of newspapers, radio and television stations is controlled by the organizations behind these outlets. In contrast, Web 2.0 applications are available for individual users, given the low costs of participating in a social network or setting up a blog. The operation of these outlets requires no heavy investment or highly professionalized knowledge.

The rapid increase in social media usage by citizens, security threats, and the possibility of strategic surprises have induced governments to develop various online monitoring strategies and tools. These include tools for tracking movements and transactions, intercepting communications, and reading and interpreting data (Bannister, 2005). Tools to access and follow relevant communications on social media are a new development. Various software tools are available for social media monitoring. Social media monitoring has its origins in the private sector. Broadly speaking, these practices are aimed at trend scouting, strategic marketing and reputation management (e.g., Sen, 2011). Gradually, social media monitoring is gaining a fully-fledged position among public organizations in the Netherlands alongside the more traditional ways of gauging sentiments and views among target groups. Instrumental and strategic orientations prevail in this endeavor, in particular to chart frames, points of view and arguments among the target groups, and anticipate possible resistance.

Web 2.0 tools can be used to facilitate collaborative practices in policymaking. Social media can be used to provide platforms for citizens to comment on government proposals or to participate in a shared policymaking project (Noveck, 2010; Coleman & Shane, 2012). Online interactions offer opportunities for knowledge sharing, and devising innovative policy designs that would not have been developed without the involvement of lay people (Steibel & Estevez, 2015). There is a wide literature on questions regarding the scale of online participation and the nature of citizens' engagement. Many researchers observe that online consultations attract relatively small numbers of participants (Coleman & Shane, 2012). At the same time, design choices in the use of online tools in consultations have important effects on participation and the nature of citizens' engagement (Wright

& Street, 2007). These design choices interact with the institutional characteristics of the policy domain in which they are used. Technological developments may enlarge the possibilities to reach different citizens groups in public consultations. Ferro et al. (2013) describe an online consultation project about telemedicine in the Piedmont Regional Government (Italy). A central system was set up within which multiple social media platforms can interact, using both application programming interfaces (i.e. a particular set of rules and specifications that software programs can follow to communicate with each other) and automated content processing techniques. In this way, a wide range of citizens groups with their own preferred social media platforms could be reached, and their interactions (views, likes, ratings, comments etc.) could be retrieved and processed in order to derive useful information for the policy makers. The authors (Ferro et al. 2013) conclude that the central cross-platform performed well in terms of reaching a widespread audience and to “single out both issues and concerns posed by various stakeholders”, but was less performing in terms of “solutions’ identification to issues and concerns posed, and also of facilitating convergence between differing stakeholders’ views” (p.366). These are important themes in the case studies of this paper.

#### ***4. An institutional perspective on policy processes: Democratic legitimacy***

The shaping of the content of a policy programme, and also the interactions between the involved stakeholders are structured by rule-based practices (Rhodes et al., 2006). In this view, policy processes are structured and governed by historically grown institutions, which reflect certain values shared in a political community. They function as a common meaning system for actors that frequently interact with each other in the development and implementation of policy programmes (Bekkers, 2015). An important part of this common meaning system are values, norms and institutions conferring democratic legitimacy. The concept of democratic legitimacy concerns the grounds upon which the members of a democratic association accept the decisions that are made, the processes by which these decisions are made and the outcomes that are produced. Legitimacy involves the conversion of power into authority, thereby establishing “simultaneously an obligation to obey and a right to rule” (Schmitter, 2001, p. 3). In this conception we consider people’s beliefs in conjunction with the normative grounds for these beliefs. Normative concepts of legitimacy in the contemporary literature are often expressed in terms of “justifiability among political equals, for instance by appeals to hypothetical acceptance or consent, [...] under appropriate choice conditions” (Føllesdal, 2006, p. 447). These choice conditions may refer to constitutionally guaranteed basic rights such as free speech and freedom of information.

Legitimacy may refer to different objects. In the concept of legitimacy described above, legitimacy refers to the justifiability of a power relationship, a political system or regime, although it may also concern particular political decisions, public institutions, or political actors (Føllesdal, 2006, p. 450). The concept of democratic legitimacy can be decomposed by distinguishing input, throughput, and output as relevant dimensions, in line with political systems theory. Scharpf (1997) introduced political system concepts in the context of legitimacy. He argues that “democratic procedures are essential in input-oriented arguments, whereas they have only instrumental value in the context of output-oriented arguments” (Scharpf, 1997, p. 153). Output-oriented arguments confer legitimacy on decisions that effectively solve problems requiring collective solutions.

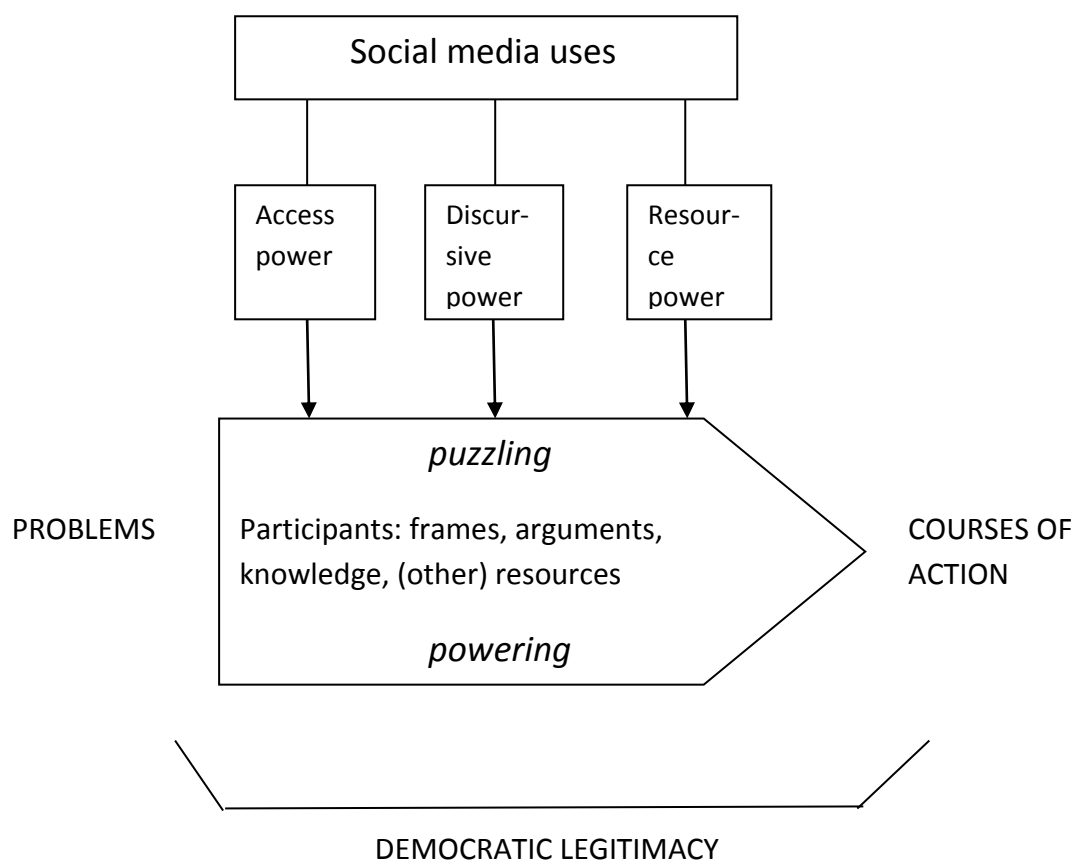
In our evaluative framework, we follow these political system dimensions (Bekkers & Edwards, 2007). Input legitimacy relates to the openness of decision-making processes. Relevant norms include the

openness of the agenda-setting process, opportunities for citizen participation, and the quality of representation by elected politicians, interest groups, or participating citizens (for the wider public). We define throughput legitimacy in terms of the quality of the processes and procedures through which binding decisions are made (Risse and Kleine, 2007). Relevant norms include legality, the quality of participation and deliberation, the existence of checks and balances, and the transparency of the decision-making process. In a democratic polity, legality should be guaranteed by the rule of law. The quality of participation involves incorporating the diversity of identities, perspectives, and interests within a community. The deliberative model of democracy provides measuring tools for evaluating the quality of participation (Eriksen and Fossum, 2004, p. 445). Checks and balances in the participatory process should ensure that the interests of minority groups or weakly organised interests are not pushed aside by majorities or powerful stakeholders. The institutions of representative democracy should be considered as an important source of checks and balances in this regard. The output-oriented dimension of legitimacy concerns the capacity of a political system to produce certain outputs or outcomes that actually contribute to the remediation of collective problems. Relevant norms include the effectiveness of the decision-making process and the policies that result from it. We add responsiveness to this pair of norms, thus relating effectiveness to the needs and values of citizens. An important aspect of democratic legitimacy is the organisation of accountability. As a norm of output legitimacy, it involves the evaluation of the results of collective decision making and its explanation to citizens. Again, when applying these criteria to governance practices and participation, representative democracy should be considered as providing safeguards for output legitimacy.

## ***5. Conceptual framework and research design***

Our conceptual framework is structured around the pair of concepts ‘puzzling’ and ‘powering’ and the three types of media power (figure 1). In each case we will first establish how the puzzling and powering dimensions of problem structuring are present, and in particular to what extent and how they are settled in social media-enabled interactions. Next, we investigate how social media uses influence the involved power relations between participants, in particular between citizens and proximate policymakers. The role of participants’ frames, arguments, knowledge and other power resources will be highlighted as well. In the Concluding Analysis we provide an evaluation of social media uses in policy processes with a view on democratic legitimacy.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework



A case study has the advantage that the interactions between relevant stakeholders, their motives, frames, interests and interactions can be understood in detail. The specific explanatory approach is 'congruence analysis'. In this approach, theories are not reduced to a set of independent variables but are treated as comprehensive perspectives. Cases are used to compare the explanatory merits of multiple theories and concepts (Blatter & Haverland, 2012).

We distinguish unsolicited and solicited forms of citizen involvement. The typical cases of unsolicited involvement are bottom up actions of protest politics. Information and communication technologies also facilitate unfacilitated top down forms of involvement, most notably the practice of social media monitoring (table 1).

Table 1: selection of cases

Unsolicited forms of citizen involvement	Solicited forms of citizen involvement
<i>Bottom up</i> : secondary school students' revolt (2007/2008)	Crowdsourcing for a new law on off road traffic (2013)
<i>Top down</i> : social media monitoring by the Dutch Ministry of Education	LinkedIn discussion group about new legislation on electricity and gas (2012)

*Case 1* - In November 2007, secondary school students in the Netherlands protested against the government's enforcement of the 1,040-hour norm. This norm refers to the total number of teaching hours that students are required to follow each year. Social media played an important role in mobilizing the students. The data for this case were gathered from interviews with six public servants in the Ministry of Education, four of them working in the communications department of the ministry. In addition, interviews were held with one secondary school director and two representatives of the trade union of secondary school teachers. The interviews were held in 2010 and 2011.

*Case 2* - As a result of these experiences, the Ministry of Education developed an online monitoring strategy to signalize discussions in the virtual domain about education-related issues. The ministry has been a frontrunner in social media monitoring, which is now gradually becoming common practice in public sector organizations in the Netherlands. For this case, we conducted one interview (2012) with the primarily involved public servant in the ministry.

*Case 3* - In Finland, there is an increasing intensity of traffic beyond established roads, such as riding on snowmobiles and All-Terrain Vehicles (ATVs). In 2013, the Finnish Ministry of Environment initiated a crowdsourcing process with the goal to harvest good ideas for a new law. In this experiment, an online platform enabled users to propose ideas, to comment on ideas and to evaluate them. The data for this case are based on publications of Aitamurto & Landemore (2014, 2015) and Landemore et al. (2014).

*Case 4* - In 2012, the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs in 2012 initiated a LinkedIn discussion group with the aim of generating ideas about a new law for Electricity and Gas. Participants were the institutional stakeholders, but also a number of people from outside the usual network of stakeholders participated, including local producers-consumers of endurable energy. Interviews were held with one of the leaders of the project team and one participant in the discussion group (May/June 2015). We consulted various documents including the evaluation report written by the project team (Wierda & Van Bergenhenegouwen (2012), consultation documents and (other) internet sources.

## **6. Description and analysis of the cases**

### *6.1 The secondary school students' revolt in the Netherlands (2007)*

The introduction of major reforms in primary and secondary education during the last decade caused the quality of education to be a widely discussed issue in the Netherlands. In 2007, discussion focused on one particular issue: the government's enforcement of the 1,040-hour norm. This norm refers to the total number of teaching hours that students are required to follow each year during the first and second years of secondary education. Many schools were unable to comply with this norm because of teacher shortages. Such schools were forced to take a variety of phony measures suggesting that students were receiving education. Students complained that they were forced to be at school, without taking classes. In November 2007, students across the country revolted against the perceived absurdity of this norm. The students coined the term 'kennel hours' to refer to these



useless hours (Bekkers et al., 2011). The initial mobilization actor in this case was the National Student Action Committee (*Landelijk Actie Komitee Scholieren*, LAKS), which acts as the trade union for secondary school students. As framed by LAKS, the 1,040 hours norm was detrimental to school quality, as demonstrated by their claim, “If you are in favour of quality, you are opposed to the 1,040 norm”. This claim dominated the discussion and was adopted by most of the involved actors, including the traditional media (Bekkers et al., 2011a). The LAKS organized strikes in schools and demonstrations in various cities. On Friday 23 November, a number of actions in several dozens of cities had been triggered by a MSN message from one student in a city of the west of the Netherlands. He had sent this message to seventy of his friends on the evening before. Social media, especially MSN, Hyves (a Dutch equivalent of Facebook) and YouTube, played an important role in mobilizing the students. However, crossovers between micromedia and mass media showed to be vital. The traditional media played an important role in strengthening the frames that the students brought forward, and they helped to legitimize their actions (Bekkers et al., 2011).

At the ministry, policymakers and the deputy minister in charge were surprised by the scale of the protest and the speed of organization of the protest actions, as well as the mobilization strength that the internet and social media provided to the protesting students. No procedures and knowledge were available at the policy department on how to react to these new, social network-driven forms of protest politics. Before then, online discussions had not been seen as relevant sources of information. Policymakers were primarily focused on the opinions and information offered by the vested organizations in the field of secondary education. During the peak of the revolt, policymakers adhered to the established standard operating procedures, thereby relying on their access to the traditional media, to counterbalance the claims of the students. For policymakers, it was also difficult to pin-point the locations of the discussions on social media. Although they were able to locate some relevant networks, they had the impression that the use of these new media made the discussion not only very fluid, but also rather invisible (Bekkers et al., 2011a). In mid-January, many secondary schools announced their refusal to comply with the 1040-norm. In the House of Representatives, the Deputy Minister promised an investigation. A commission was established which engaged in broad consultations within the field. They proposed a compromise which was accepted by the stakeholders and the ministry.

This case is a typical occurrence of protest politics about the implementation of a policy measure. On the face of it, the case is all about powering. However, the issue of the 1,040 hours norm reflects fundamental questions about the quality of education and the autonomy of schools. According to a parliamentary enquiry committee, “politics had overloaded the field of education with ambitions” and “trampled the freedom of the schools” (Commissie-Dijsselbloem 2008, 128,131). By contesting the 1,040 hours norm the students addressed competing problem representations and problem framings regarding the quality of education.

In terms of access power, this case shows that access to networks of friends that can be linked and mobilized has the capacity to include numerous people in the protest. The open character of many social networks did not only help the students but also the traditional media to take notice of the events. For the television shows and newspapers free material was available. In terms of discourse power, we see that the students framed the issue in an appealing way which helped students, teachers and members of the school boards to identify themselves with the issue, thereby contributing to a process of frame alignment. The availability of social media provided the students with a structure of media power throughout this process. The use of mobile telephones with digital

cameras facilitated the real-time coverage of the disturbances and the police actions through postings on YouTube and other social networking sites. This helped to produce and reproduce a shared understanding about the need to protest. Personal experiences and comments were also shared on these sites. We can therefore conclude that the discursive power of social media helped to expand the issue, thereby aligning frames by sharing written and visualized experiences. In terms of resource power we see that the students possessed the necessary devices and capacities to use social media applications effectively. The traditional media facilitated this process by using photos and videos that were made available through YouTube and other sites. This provides evidence of cross-over effects between social media and the traditional media. We conclude that the discursive, access and resource power of social media facilitated a process of self-organization of students to be politically effective. However, the final problem settlement was reached by a commission after consultations with the stakeholders within the field, a very traditional way of 'powering' within the Dutch 'consensus democracy'.

## *6.2 Social media monitoring by the Ministry of Education (Netherlands)*

As a result of these experiences, the ministry developed an online monitoring strategy to signalize discussions in the virtual domain about education-related issues at an early stage. It was considered that online early warning systems could reduce the risk of the department being surprised and confronted with new issues and unforeseen protests. Online monitoring would provide the department with a digital scan of online discussions; this was seen as a useful extra source of information in addition to traditional media monitoring. The protests of secondary school students have been a wake up-call for developing this strategy within the new division 'Knowledge about the Environment and Communication' (*Afdeling Omgevingskennis en Communicatie*). Public servants have become more aware of the need to monitor the environment permanently to find out what teachers, students and parents say and think about policy programs and policy intentions (Bekkers et al., 2013).

The ministry's aims in relation to social media monitoring can be described in terms of "getting policies better understood and therefore possibly better accepted" or "touching your target groups" (interview). One has to become acquainted with what matters within the target group. Other, more specific aims of social media monitoring are to ascertain the differences in viewpoints and sentiments among citizens about policy measures and to discover unexpected points of view that are not (yet) represented in the debate in the traditional media. There is a small specialized unit for social media monitoring at the ministry's Communication Directorate. They concentrate on policy priorities. The monitoring method consists of feeding software tools with selected keywords. The tools scan the internet and produce overviews of instances of communication, with the online locations where these keywords are used. Further analyses focus on argumentation patterns. Of special interest are new arguments that are cropping up. Several public servants have their own selection of relevant networks and online forums on their list of favorites. In this case, particular sets of networks and forums are monitored more or less permanently. In the course of time, social media monitoring has gained a fully-fledged position within the ministry's communication architecture. The results of social media monitoring are used in the ministry's broader communication policies, alongside the results of traditional media monitoring and regular public opinion surveys. In crisis-like situations, the results are directly channeled to the political decision makers and the ministry's

spokespersons. In other cases, the results are gradually embedded in policies. In some cases, the results have a bearing on the regular consultations with interest groups from the field, especially when the sentiments and viewpoints voiced on social media by, for instance, students are different from those expressed by their institutional representatives. Monitoring can also serve an anticipatory function. Prior to student actions, for instance, the ministry is able to infer from the intensity of sentiments expressed on social media how large the action will be. This information enables the ministry in taking appropriate action (Bekkers et al., 2013).

This case of social media monitoring by a policy department shows how monitoring technology can support the puzzling dimension of problem structuring, because it opens up the exchange of viewpoints, including new and unexpected arguments, by citizens on social media. In terms of access power, social media monitoring has two sides. On the one hand, it can be seen as a way through which citizens' points of view and arguments can reach the proximate policymakers. However, because of the top down and covert nature of social media monitoring it primarily strengthens the ministry's access power vis-à-vis its target groups. Furthermore, the expounding of frames, points of view and arguments also strengthens the ministry's discursive power, because it enables the policymakers to better anticipate the reactions on future policy measures and to adapt its communication policy accordingly. In terms of resource power, social media monitoring provides policymakers with a new instrument to gauge the public opinion, alongside the monitoring of publicity in the traditional media and surveys. However, social media monitoring entails some risks in this respect. First, the reliability and quality of information shared in social media can be doubtful. Furthermore, social media can distribute and enlarge news very quickly, potentially leading to lots of attention on incidents and misconceptions of the day. Third, it is unclear whether the participants in social media are representative of a larger group (Bekkers et al. 2013). The case also reveals some aspects, which are relevant for the powering dimension of policy processes, in particular the strategic use of the results of social media monitoring in consultations with interest groups.

### *6.3 Crowdsourcing for a new law on off road traffic (Finland)*

In 2010, the Finnish government proposed a bill to the parliament to reform the existing off-road traffic law. One reason to reform the law is the increased volume of off-road traffic, with an increasing number of ATVs and snowmobiles. The bill expired in parliament after raising various controversies. Having failed to produce a viable proposal, the Finnish Ministry of Environment decided to initiate a crowdsourcing experiment. The goal was aimed "to search for ideas, knowledge, and perspectives from online participants and to enhance the general public's understanding of the law" (Aitamurto & Landemore, 2015: 4). An online platform facilitated problem mapping, ideation, knowledge sharing and information exchange among participants. Users could propose ideas on the platform, comment, and vote others' ideas up or down. All of the crowd-generated input was visible to the public online. Users could also post pictures and other attachments on the platform, as well as tag their ideas and comments with key words that were aggregated and visible to all users. In addition, a website was established to provide access to information about off-road traffic and the existing law (Aitamurto et al. 2014).

The whole process included four phases. In the first phase, the public was invited to share problems, concerns and experiences. In the second phase, the public was asked to share solutions for the problems distilled from the first phase. In the third phase the generated ideas were evaluated. The

drafting of the new bill constituted the fourth phase. The first phase started in January 2013; the third phase ended in October, 2013 (Aitamurto & Landemore, 2015). During the two idea crowdsourcing stages 700 out of 7,000 visitors registered on the site in order to participate.<sup>1</sup> At the start of the first phase, civil servants within the Ministry and the researchers defined ten main areas in which problems could be identified. However, a category called “Propose your own topic” was added by public demand, which allowed participants to make suggestions outside the provided agenda. For the second phase, the broad areas were divided into more narrow topics. Again, participants could also propose their own topic in the “Propose your own topic” section. In the third phase, ideas were assessed by crowd and expert evaluation. Crowd evaluation was conducted on a specific online platform. The participants received a random sample of ideas to be evaluated. Two evaluation methods were used: rating and comparison. The expert evaluation was performed through online surveys administered to experts in Finland, the United States, and Estonia. The respondents were asked to rate ideas according to feasibility, efficiency, cost-efficiency and fairness, together with the reasoning for their evaluation (Aitamurto & Landemore, 2015). In the fourth phase, the actual drafting of the new bill, the usual policymaking procedures came into play. These include the consultation of interest groups and political parties in a so-called ‘expert committee’.

In this case, the crowdsourcing represents an extended process of ‘puzzling’, in which information and knowledge is gathered according to a clear structure of problem definition, search of possible solutions and evaluation. Crowdsourcing typically mobilizes ‘lay knowledge’ as well as scientific expert knowledge. In the evaluation phase a distinction was made between ‘crowd evaluation’ and ‘expert evaluation’. The ‘powering’ dimension of problem structuring came into play at the end of the process. In terms of access power, the crowdsourcing allowed for the participation of a large number of participants. As noted by Aitamurto and Landemore (2015:8), “a larger crowd is more likely to contain a greater degree of cognitive diversity with respect to the set of issues at stake”. In this context, they also note that although crowdsourcing is based on self-selection, the issues and viewpoints that are relevant in the debate might still be present in the crowd’s input (provided that the number of participants is sufficiently high). With regard to discursive power, Aitamurto & Landemore (2015) observe that although the project design did not provide a specific incentive for deliberation, participants nevertheless did exchange arguments. The authors conclude that “the crowdsourced process functioned both as a knowledge search and a space for democratic deliberation” (p. 6).

#### *6.4 A LinkedIn discussion group about new legislation on electricity and gas (Netherlands)*

Round 1995, the notion of ‘working with the market’ became the leading principle in Dutch energy policy. As a result a new Electricity Act came into being in 1998, and a Gas Act in 2000. In the first phase of liberalization, the relationship between the government and the actors in the energy market was characterized by mutual distrust. There was a downward spiral of vertical steering by the government, as well as strategic behavior and decreasing commitment of market players to helping realize public goals (Van Beuningen & Van Berghenhenegouwen, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> Aitamurto and Landemore (2015: 6) observe that these numbers are in keeping with the so-called 1-9-90 rule in participation, which states that typically 90 percent of the visitors only observe the online activity and 10 percent participate more actively. (Out of the 10 percent, 1% produce most of the content).

The Netherlands is facing a transition towards a sustainable energy system. New legislation is needed for accomplishing this. The responsible Ministry of Economic Affairs considered that this new legislation should not only help to accomplish substantive goals regarding sustainability, but also lay the foundation for new patterns of relationship, for joint problem-solving and room for own responsibility within the energy sector. The law-making process should be arranged in such a way that mutual trust between the stakeholders could be restored. An important objective of the ministry was to move away from the usual pattern of bilateral interactions with stakeholders and to create a communication arena in which the stakeholders and the ministry could meet together. Against this backdrop, the ministry organized the STROOM-project.<sup>2</sup> A broad communication framework was designed, including a LinkedIn discussion group. In this discussion group, a broad and diverse group of ‘professionals’ discussed from April till July 2012 the “problems, dilemmas and possible solutions which should be given their due place in the legislation” (Wierda & Van Bergenhenegouwen, 2012). Primary interactional goals were to gather new ideas, and reach agreement on new legislation.

The discussion group was meant for ‘professionals’, i.e. people with knowledge on and experience in the energy sector. Participants were recruited through various channels. Every participant, except those from the ministry itself, the Netherlands Competition Authority and the Netherlands Enterprise Agency, had to be approved of by the organizing project group. One application was refused. The composition of the group was considered to be “a representation of the energy sector in the Netherlands.” (Wierda & Van Bergenhenegouwen, 2012, p.7). The total number of ‘members’ of the discussion group during the initial period of discussion was about 800. Apart from the ministry, the major stakeholders in the energy sector were most strongly represented in the group. Two major public agencies participated, the Netherlands Competition Authority (NMA) with 32 members and the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO, at that time Agentschap NL) (25), as well as the major energy companies. However, a substantial number of “unusual discussion partners” participated, including scientists, power-generating consumers and some municipalities. In the discussion, 420 reactions were posted by 80 participants. The choice for the medium LinkedIn was made for various reasons. First of all, LinkedIn is by far the biggest network among professionals in the Netherlands. It is relatively easy to manage. Furthermore, LinkedIn makes it possible to cut off the discussion group from search engines.

In the general invitation, three subjects were mentioned as the agenda for the LinkedIn discussion group: local sustainable energy, consumers protection and ‘codes’.<sup>3</sup> However, in an initial sub-discussion about the general conception and structure of chapters in the new legislation, these themes were integrated into an approach in which the whole production chain of energy could be discussed. All specific discussion topics had to be approved of by the project team. In some cases, topics were refused for substantive reasons, for instance about fiscal measures which do not fit with the STROOM-agenda. The 420 reactions were posted within 21 sub-discussions, which were started by 13 different participants.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> STROOM stands for Streamlining (*Stroomlijnen*), Optimizing (*Optimaliseren*) and Modernizing (*Moderniseren*). The Dutch word ‘stroom’ also means ‘electric power’ or ‘current’.

<sup>3</sup> These ‘codes’ or norms include tariff codes, technical codes and information codes.

<sup>4</sup> The numbers of 800 members, 80 participants and 13 initiators of discussions is in line with the 90-9-1 ‘rule’ in online participation.

After the online discussion the project team organized a face-to-face 'harvest session' in which the staff of the ministry evaluated the generated ideas. This involved a preliminary selection in terms of 'yes' ( i.e. consider to include in the legislation), 'no' or 'perhaps'. In a round table conference (a week after the 'harvest session') the organizing team (together with staff of the ministry and some of the most active members of the discussion group) discussed how it would proceed with the ideas assessed in terms of 'yes' and 'perhaps'. A number of core themes were discussed in depth. In this way, the contours of the legislative proposal became visible. In January and February 2014, the final results were submitted to a formal consultation of the general public on the website *internetconsultatie.nl*. On this website, departments (can) submit a bill to a public reading before it is introduced in the parliament.

The results of the round table conference were communicated in the discussion group (feedback). The organizers considered the LinkedIn discussion as a success. The approach and working format were effective for generating new and usefull ideas. The internal transparency of the process, in terms of clarity about which actor holds which viewpoint, was a part of its success. The participants highly appreciated the approach.

In this project the puzzling and powering dimensions of policymaking went hand in hand. In terms of access power, we observe that membership of the LinkedIn group was easily accessible. Most importantly, a relatively high number of discussion partners participated, who are not a member of the institutional network with which the ministry regularly negotiates. In terms of discourse power, we can observe that the agenda was relatively open. Although three broad themes were initially indicated by the project team, the real agenda was set in a specific discussion about the basic outline of the new legislation ('mega-policymaking', Hoppe, 1983). However, each specific discussion topic had to be approved, and some were refused. Discussions were conducted in an open atmosphere, in which many interesting and new ideas were brought forward. Later on, however, especially in the evaluation phase, the process became more closed. In this phase, access power and discursive power shifted to the department staff. With regard to resource power, the use of LinkedIn allowed for internal transparency, as well as for closeness towards the external environment. Internal transparency and external closeness facilitated the 'multi-issue game', in which an exchange could take place between many participants on a broad number of specific issues.

## **7. Concluding analysis**

The two cases of unsolicited forms of citizen involvement show that social media constitutes a double-edged sword. In terms of access power, it creates specific opportunities to citizens seeking to advance their ideas and frames, thereby influencing the likelihood that these ideas will gain access to a larger public and to proximate policymakers. On the other hand, the same technology provides opportunities to policymakers to gain access to the social networks where citizens develop and exchange their viewpoints. With regard to discursive power, social media helps citizens to expand the issues they bring forward, thereby aligning frames of other stakeholders as well. At the same time, social media monitoring enables policymakers to retrieve the frames and arguments used by citizens, thereby strengthening their capacity to anticipate new arguments in the debate. In terms of resource power, social media enhances the autonomy of users in the creation and diffusion of content.

However, this autonomy is under constant surveillance. Social media can be used by policymakers to target specific groups with specific messages.

In the two cases of solicited citizen participation we see that the use of social media by policymakers provided access to the policymaking arena to a broad number of participants, and more opportunities to bring forward ideas, arguments and knowledge. There are some differences between the cases in this respect. In the Dutch case of energy policy, the target group of participants were stakeholders and other professionals in the energy sector, whereas the Finnish crowdsourcing experiment (also) included lay people. In the Finnish case, lay people were also involved in the evaluation of ideas, whereas the evaluation in the Dutch energy case was the preserve of civil servants. An important difference between the two cases is that in the Dutch case the 'puzzling' and 'powering' dimensions were more intertwined. This was intended by the initiators of the project, who wished to abandon the traditional pattern of bilateral negotiations with stakeholders. In the Finnish case, the powering activities between stakeholders were settled in a traditional procedure in the final phase of drafting the bill. In this respect, the whole process was more transparent and open in the Dutch case. However, this is in line with the fact that only 'professionals' did participate.

For our assessment of the significance of social media uses for democratic legitimacy it is crucial to take the interaction between technology and institutions into account. In the context of Western democracies, this assessment is relatively straightforward with regard to the input side, because the institutional conditions, by way of fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression and associational autonomy, are guaranteed. The use of social media by citizens and policymakers provides new opportunities for participation, especially for other people than civil servants and selected interest group representatives. They provide new avenues for the expression of demands and concerns. In the two cases of solicited participation the agenda was relatively open. The quality of representation is difficult to appraise. We do not know whether the protesting secondary school students were representative for the whole population of students. The representativeness of voices on social media can be put in doubt. Solicited forms of (online) participation, which are based on self-selection suffer from various participation biases (Saward, 2009).<sup>5</sup> On the throughput side the picture is mixed. The significance of social media for the quality of participation is dependent on the opportunities that are provided for communication between citizens and policymakers as well as specific design factors, such as the technical infrastructure, and the existence and form of moderation. The enhanced possibilities for participation of people outside the circle of proximate policymakers can in itself be seen as a factor contributing to checks and balances. The revolt of secondary students and other 'online revolts' (Dorsman et al., 2015) are clear examples of mobilization of 'counterpower'. Checks and balances are also dependent on internal conditions pertaining to the interactions between lay people, institutional stakeholders and civil servants. An important factor involves the relation with the parliament. A new role of the parliament in the changing political arena of 'governance' (Newman, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007) lies in guaranteeing and monitoring these internal conditions for an equal level playing field. In the cases, we did not observe that parliaments take up this role. The norm of transparency can be seen as a precondition for the functioning of checks and balances, and is also a precondition for the output norm of accountability. In their assessment of the off-road traffic law project, Aitamurto and

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<sup>5</sup> Aitamurto & Landemore (2014) acknowledge that the participation in the crowdsourcing process was "skewed in favor of a certain type of citizens."

Landemore (2015) observe several weaknesses regarding transparency. Transparency (and accountability) are crucial in the case of social media monitoring because of its covert nature (Bekkers et al., 2013). Effectiveness, responsiveness and accountability (output legitimacy) is, again, dependent on internal conditions as well as on the interaction between the deliberative governance practices and representative democracy. The impact on political decisionmaking is a notable weakness in deliberative participation projects (Smith, 2009). In the Dutch case, the publication of the consultation document on the website *internetconsultatie.nl* constituted a provision for accountability. We may conclude that the significance of technology for democratic legitimacy is strongest on the input side of political decisionmaking, and weaker (but not negligible) on the throughput and output side.

## **8. Conclusion**

Investigating the role of digital media in political processes entails the observation of a moving target. The use of social media raises new research issues in addition to the issues on which researchers focused in the era of Web 1.0. Our main conclusion is that social media does affect the opportunity structure for participation in policy processes. The cases suggest that both the puzzling and powering dimensions of policy processes are affected. The evidence is relatively strong with regard to the puzzling dimension, especially in the input and to a certain extent also in the throughput phase. More participants, also outside the network of interest groups, experts and civil servants, can bring forward their concerns, frames, arguments and knowledge. In the throughput phase, the significance of social media for checks and balances, transparency and the quality of deliberation is strongly dependent on institutional and design factors. All-in all, the cases suggest that the opportunity structure is affected by the new technologies. However, a transformation in the direction of popular control and responsiveness is not visible.

The solicited forms of participation discussed in this paper constitute social media-enabled 'governance practices', which are laying claim on an own form of democratic legitimacy. This claim seems to compete with the traditional position of the parliament as the core institution within representative democracy. The initiators of the Dutch project on energy policy were keenly aware of the possible tension between their project and the traditional role of the parliament (interview). The online forms of participation accentuate this tension because online technologies make a more inclusive and fine-grained process possible, both in terms of information and knowledge search, deliberation and negotiation. These effects, which bring us deeper into the throughput and output phases are an important subject for future research



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