**Social media and policy processes—three comparative perspectives**

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**Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to outline a range of comparative perspectives to help us understand the role of social media in policy processes and to connect this area of inquiry to core concerns in political science and media and communication research.

My starting point is the following four basic tenets I take as already established. First, social media are parts of socio-technical practices. Social media are used by actors and organizations, typically as part of practices that also involve other tools and technologies, both digital and analogue, and their implications for, for example, policy, depends on these practices and these combinations of tools (Nielsen, 2011). Second, social media are increasingly everywhere, at least in high income democracies. Social media, or more precisely social networking sites, defined by Boyd and Ellison (2007) as web-based services that allow individuals (and organizations) to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system, are integrated into the daily routines of literally billions of people, including people involved in policy-making. Third, social media increasingly matter for policy processes. They matter at least in the sense that they are seen as mattering—which is why many types of political actors have developed social media strategies and invested time and resources in them—and potentially in more substantial ways in terms of being part of changing or at least influencing policy outcomes (Margetts and Dunleavy, 2013). Fourth, social media continually evolve. New social media are established, some old ones fade away, existing ones grow or wane in popularity and change their functionality, generally at a pace well beyond that of traditional social science forms of data-gathering, analysis, and publication (Karpf, 2012a).

Given this, how do we understand the role of social media in policy processes? I will suggest we need to develop and maintain three comparative perspectives to do so. These three comparative perspectives are based on the following simple (but in my view important and sometimes overlooked) observations. First, the prominence of social media in different policy processes is deeply uneven. The important role of social media as part of protests against the so-called “Stop Online Privacy Act” (SOPA) and “Protect Intellectual Property Act” (PIPA) in the US in 2012 and its cousin, the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), in a range of other countries, does not mean social networking sites were important for lobbying on, say, economic policy or security policy (much depend on the countervailing forces). Second, social media, both where they are very prominent parts of policy processes and where they are not, are not alone—they are part of wider strategic political and media repertoires. Even highly digitally dependent policy campaigns also involve many other tools. The SOPA/PIPA in the US protests relied on online organizing and groups identified with it, like MoveOn, but also legacy media coverage and older advocacy organizations like the ACLU the rely less on social media. Third, social media and their role in policy processes need to be understood in their institutional context. Whether dealing with issues of intellectual property rights enforcement at the heart of SOPA, PIPA, and ACTA, monetary policy, or military acquisition, doing so differs in important ways from place to place, from setting to setting.

At the most basic level, the point of these three comparative perspectives is to say that (1) even though social media are increasingly popular basically everywhere and in some cases, very prominent parts of policy processes, this does not mean they always are, that (2) even where they are prominent—and even more so where they are not—they are part of wider media repertoires and political strategies and cannot be understood in isolation, and that (3) their role in one context—federal versus local, US versus elsewhere—does not necessarily mean they have the same role elsewhere. These three points may seem simple, but those familiar with the larger literature on social media and political campaigns will know they have been frequently disregarded. The argument is not that one cannot learn anything of general relevance from studying the Obama campaign (or the Obama White House). It is simply that unless one has a clearly articulated framework for analytical generalization, the results probably only apply to the Obama campaign or the Obama White House, and not to Boston’s City Hall or to the French Presidential palace Élysée.

Below, I develop each point in turn, before returning to how one might connect the study of social media and policy processes to core concerns in political science and media and communication research.

**Social media as uneven**

Social media are part of an increasingly digital media environment that is in many ways more deeply uneven than what we have been accustomed to from a world of analogue media. Different policy areas and different political actors have always had very different degrees of visibility in newspapers and broadcast media, and with retrenchment in the news media industry, some areas are hardly covered on a regular basis. In general, however, digital media, including social media, seems even more uneven. The shift is sometimes said to be one from normal distributions around a mean to power law distributions with a big head and a long tail.

The deeply uneven topology of the digital environment has been observed in electoral politics, in e-government, and in online activism and is likely to be found when it comes to social media and policy too. Take electoral politics, where one analysis comparing the levels of local news coverage versus the levels of social media support for candidates for the House of Representatives in the United States found the number of Facebook supporters and Twitter followers were far more unevenly distributed than the number of news stories about candidates or campaign expenditures (Nielsen and Vaccari, 2013). In e-government research, it has been found that the vast majority (in the UK about 95%) of all e-petitions to official government websites, fail to draw any significant number of signatures, and that a very small number of petitions account for the vast majority of all activity (Margetts et al, 2014). Clay Shirky (2008) has highlighted this as a general feature of online activism from the earliest days of the web.

This unevenness has important consequences for how we think about research on social media and policy processes, including questions of case selection, sampling, and analytic generalization. In a normally distributed environment, an average case is both representative of the majority of all cases and the majority of all activity. In a power law distribution, an average case may be representative of the majority (a median case is better), but will not be representative of the majority of all activity, which will be concentrated in a few exceptional outliers. Thus whereas a case selection strategy in a normally distributed environment may focus on a few average cases, a case selection strategy in a power distribution environment need to understand both the big head, the few cases that account for most of the activity, and the long tail, the majority of cases where very little happens. This comparative perspective is likely to be as important for our overall understanding of social media and policy processes as it is for our overall understanding of how digital media works in electoral politics, e-government, and activism.

**Social media as part of wider strategic political and media repertoires**

Like other forms of mediated activism, from letter campaigns, over call-ins and faxed petitions, to more recently emails and online petitions, various forms of social media engagement with policy processes is likely to be dismissed as “clicktivism” or “slacktivism”. After all, joining a Facebook group or retweeting something is unlikely to change or stop a global trade agreement or some such. There is a kernel of truth in this attitude, in that it captures that most of what happens on social media, like most of all human activity, is ineffective in terms of influencing outcomes. (It may be significant in other ways.) But as a basic approach to understanding the role of social media in policy processes, it is misled by what Dave Karpf (2014) has called an “optical illusion”, as it mistakes the discrete digital act for the wider process it may be part of. Both from the point of view of the individual getting involved and from the point of view of the political actors trying to mobilize people (and those that people are mobilized against), everything about that seemingly low-value, superficial clicking of the “like” or “share” button depends on context (Karpf, 2010). Is this the first step up a ladder of engagement? What is the position in a wider strategic repertoire? What are the ways in which that click may be leveraged, say, by drawing news media attention to how much traffic a YouTube video is getting?

Especially because social media, at least in high income democracies, are increasingly ubiquitous, and increasingly integrated into the strategic repertoire of all political actors, the mere absence or presence of a social media element in a policy process is less and less likely to be a meaningful factor. Just as scholars of collective action are increasingly arguing that research needs to focus not on the relative presence or absence of digital technology as part of mobilizations, but on the various “participatory styles” (Bimber et al, 2012) and types of large-scale action networks (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013), we will need a closer examination of the precise, and varied, place of different kinds of social media as parts of different political actors’ policy strategies to understand the relation between social media and policy processes.

Of course the increasing ubiquity of social media and the observation that we need to see them as parts of wider repertoires cuts both ways. The fact that social media are parts of wider socio-technical political processes, are increasingly everywhere, but are not alone, and should be understood as parts of wider strategic political and media repertoires does not mean they are always important parts of these repertoires. (Something can be ubiquitous and yet unimportant—we don’t talk about “Microsoft Outlook and policy processes”.) This is an empirical question. An interesting parallel may be offered here to discussions of the role of news media in politics and policy processes. News, in the twentieth century, like social media in the twenty-first, have increasingly been everywhere and visible elements of most political processes. This has led some to argue that politics has become “mediatized”, subject to something called “the media logic”. But in fact, closer empirical scrutiny in for example the UK Parliament shows that while junior politicians far from the centers of power do rely in part on media, amongst other sources, for information about what is going on, for senior politicians, especially those in executive positions, media is of marginal importance compared to the information provided by the bureaucracy, by interest groups, by political colleagues, etc (Davis, 2007). (An anecdotal aside—I have spoken to many communication advisers, some politicians, and a few public affairs consultants who see social media as central to political processes today, but have yet to hear a bureaucrat/civil servant say so.) Like news media, social media are increasingly part of all policy processes in one way or another. But like with news media, this does not mean they are necessarily an important part. Understanding when, where, and why they are require a comparative perspectives that takes social media seriously as potentially more than clicktivism (and as seen by more and more political actors as more than clicktivism) and consider the role of social media as parts of wider political and media repertoires.

**Social media and institutional context**

Finally, though the rise of social media is a transnational phenomenon where the same, US-based digital intermediaries have in a relatively short time-span come to occupy exceptionally central positions in the media environment of almost all high income democracies, the implications for policy processes will almost certainly be highly dependent on the institutional context. I will discuss briefly two cross-national examples of institutional context, namely the idea of media systems and the idea of policy knowledge regimes and how they might influence the way in which social media become part of policy processes in different nations—but the point applies equally to intra-national institutional variation, for example between the federal, the state, and the local level in a country like the US.

The first idea is that of media systems, that even within the subset of otherwise similarly high-income and similarly democratic countries, the structure, functions, and popular uses of media differ in significant ways. Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004) set the agenda for a renewed scholarly interest in comparative work on media, and offered a range of ideal type media systems that have, to various degrees, found empirical validation (Bruggemann et al, 2014), also when it comes to how people in different countries with similar levels of overall social media use, use social media specifically to engage with news and politics (Nielsen and Schrøder, 2014). Basically, people in all high income democracies have embraced social media, but they use these sites more to engage with news and politics in countries where there are low levels of trust in news media and political institutions (Italy, the US) than in those where there are higher levels of trust (Denmark, Germany). Such cross-national institutional variations in the role of news media in turn seem to influence the ways in which people use social media, also in terms of how they use them to engage in policy processes.

The second idea is the idea of policy knowledge regimes, developed by John L. Campbell and Ove K. Pedersen (2014) to capture cross-national variation in the organizational and institutional machinery that generates data, research, policy recommendations, and other ideas that influence elite debates and policymaking. In their comparative analysis, they identify a US knowledge regime that is competitive and bifurcated between distinct public and private policy research organizations (and where especially the latter invest heavily in strategic communications, today increasingly also social media), a French knowledge regime that is largely statist (and where influence is centered in the state bureaucracy and best exercised by private connections to central policymakers and their personal cabinets, processes where social media are arguably less likely to be important), and a German knowledge regime that is characterized by coordination and continued privileging of semi-public research organizations (and where influence is exercised more through neo-corporatist networks than through external strategic communications). Systematic research is only beginning on knowledge regimes, and Campbell and Pedersen themselves underline that more work is needed beyond their research on the institutions that have developed around economic policy making in different countries as well as the interactions between these institutions and various kinds of media systems and changing forms of external strategic communication, including social media (personal communication). The US, for example, is a country in which the inherited and almost exclusively commercially based media system has been particularly harshly hit by the rise of digital media and a country in which the political system has long been far more open to outside lobbying, individual interest groups, and advocacy campaigns than many Western European countries. Germany is very different on both counts. Such cross-national institutional variations in how knowledge is produced and filtered into policy processes is also likely to influence how social media can play a role in policy processes.

This comparative perspective at its most basic insists that we link the study of social media and policy processes to enduring concerns in comparative media research and comparative politics and abstain from the kind of naïve universalism that sometimes characterize both academic and professional discussions of new digital technologies. Even though the rise of social media is a transnational phenomenon with largely parallel increases in terms of overall use in countries where the digital infrastructure is equally developed, the ways in which people use social media, and the ways in which these forms of use interact with existing media and political institutions, is highly context dependent.

**Concluding discussion**

What might we learn from analysing social media and their role in policy processes through one or more of the three comparative perspectives outlined above?

At the most basic level, because the role of social media in policy processes is poorly documented and poorly understood, we have an open field for almost endless empiricism, describing and analysing, whether predominantly based on quantitative or qualitative methods, the use of this or that social media tool as part of some or other policy process. Because we know so little, such case studies, of the kind that have been so prominent in the study of the role of social media in political campaigning and in news, are a welcome start.

At a somewhat higher level, there is scope for using social media and policy processes as a lens through which to develop a stronger understanding of some of the underlying problems raised by the three comparative perspectives briefly outlined above, i.e., why some actors and policy issues take off on social media and others not, why social media are central to some political practices and less so to others, and why social media are important in some contexts, and not in others. We can learn a lot from some of the earlier discussion of internet politics and social media in campaigns, and how those discussions were perhaps not always sufficiently attuned to the need for comparative perspectives on individual findings. I hope workshops like this can help the study of social media and policy processes avoid some of the methodological nationalism, intellectual insularity, etc. that has plagued some other discussion of the political implications of new technologies. The fact that some social media practices were central to the Obama presidential campaigns’ success does not mean that similar practices were equally central to other presidential campaigns in the US, presidential campaigns elsewhere, let alone other kinds of campaigns. In parallel, the fact that some social media practices may be shown to be central to one particular policy processes does not mean similar practices are central in other policy areas in the same context, to similar policy areas in other contexts, or policy processes in other countries. The digital environment in many ways seems to be one populated with a few exceptional outliers (sometimes high-impact outliers, like a successful presidential campaign or high profile advocacy campaign) and a far greater population of less exceptional cases that is sometimes overlooked even if they equally important to understand.

But it seems to me that studies of social media and policy processes should also aim higher than this, and aim to address questions that can be formulated without using the term “social media” and “policy process”, the way that scholars empirically interested in the role of digital media in electoral politics, social movements, and the news media have used their analysis to offer wider arguments about changing forms of political power (Bimber, 2003; Kreiss, 2012; Chadwick, 2013) and collective action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Kreiss et al, 2011; Karpf, 2012b). What I mean by that is that the underlying motivation of at least some of our work in this area should be to shed light on the core concerns of political science and media and communication research, which I take to be of broadly speaking three kinds—first, contributing to a better substantial understanding of the problems of our time (the present and future of democracy, of community, of the economy, of the environment, etc.), second, develop more useful theories for enabling such understandings, third, developing more precise and reliable methods and combinations of methods for arriving at more valid understandings. Here, part of the challenge is to understand what social media mean now for policy processes in, to reprise my three comparative perspectives, an uneven environment, as parts of wider repertoires, and in different institutional contexts. The bigger (and slightly impossible) challenge is whether they are part of a much wider and perhaps transnational and context-transcending radical challenge to the institutional preconditions for 20th century forms of representative democracy, interest group organization, and media production. Seen in this light, the study of social media and policy processes only starts with social media and policy processes, and should neither confine itself nor let itself be confined to this. There are bigger issues at stake, issues we need to address together.

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