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Media and Policy Making in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Do media influence policy making? To what extent can governments or other actors manipulate this influence? Our understanding of the relationship between media and policy making remains limited, as separate research agendas look at parts of the puzzle in public policy, political communication, and related fields. This article tries to bridge these divides, to show how knowledge from different fields may be complementary, and to point to shortcomings and blind spots in existing research. By bringing different strands together, I show that media, old and new, are the main arena for the battle over the scope of policy conflict. The review discusses different factors determining or influencing media coverage of and influence on policy making, before looking at how governments and administrations deal with media coverage of policy making. I explore how ongoing changes in the media landscape are likely to affect the media–policy making nexus. The final section presents future research directions.

INTRODUCTION

We know a lot about how media may influence political behavior. We know a lot less about whether and how media influence policy making. Similarly, how do governments deal with and respond to media influence? The relation between media and policy making has long been neglected (Wolfe et al. 2013). It has been covered by separate research agendas in political communication and policy studies (Russell et al. 2016), and also—indirectly—in political behavior. Most of the research on media and politics has historically focused on media effects on voters, looking almost exclusively at electoral campaigns. Over time, other aspects of this relationship came to be identified and investigated. Studies have looked at the watchdog role of media, at the capacity of governments to dominate the public agenda, and at media influence during political crises or natural disasters. But we lack a more general understanding of how media may influence policy making processes.

I argue that media are instrumental to determining the "scope of conflict" (Schattschneider 1960). Schattschneider identified a permanent tension between those who want to widen that scope and those who work to limit conflict. The choice of the dominant strategy, i.e., expansion or limitation, usually depends on which strategy looks more promising. Actors close to the decision try to limit conflict to exclude potential rivals. Those marginal to the decision may hope to get a more favorable outcome by expanding the conflict beyond the actors that are critical to policy making. Since politics is now essentially mediatized (Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999), the expansion and limitation of conflict essentially take place through media. Governments use their privileged access to media to try to limit conflict or to concentrate conflict on those issues that they hope will be most rewarding for government. More marginal players, to the contrary, try to use media to attract attention and to expand conflict, hoping to weaken government control on a given issue or the general flow of news.

This struggle may be undergoing fundamental change in the context of a rapidly transforming media landscape. The rise of digital and social media is changing our vision of politics and political competition. Countless contributions by scholars and journalists provide a frightening picture of the potentially harmful effects of current changes. Many observers fear that new media will contribute to polarization (Bail et al. 2018) and favor populism and audience fragmentation (Engesser et al. 2017), as well as echo chambers, cognitive bubbles, and the spread of fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017, Bovet & Makse 2019). The actual extent of those changes is subject to debate, though (Chadwick 2017, Jungherr et al. 2020).

Little is known about how new media may affect policies and policy making. New media and technology may facilitate access to information, and the decline of classical gatekeeping functions may create opportunities for new or formerly marginal actors. An optimistic view thus would imply that policy making has become more inclusive. A more critical view would probably argue that social media may also have led to more disinformation and to a widening of the knowledge gap among citizens, making policy making more noisy rather than more inclusive. Similarly, for governments, the 24-hour news cycle and social media may be affecting the capacity to keep ahead of the news, forcing governments to devise new strategies in a context of increasingly critical public scrutiny.

This review proceeds as follows. The first section below takes stock of research on the media–policy link, looking at media effects on voters and political actors and examining media-specific processes. The second section looks at how governments deal with possible media coverage of and influence on policy making. The third section discusses the 24-hour news cycle, the rise of digital and social media, and their consequences for policy making. The fourth section lists several directions for future research.

MEDIA INFLUENCE ON POLICY MAKING

The study of the role of media in politics has primarily focused on the way media influence people's perceptions of the world [Lasswell 1971 (1927),[1] Lippmann 1997 (1922)]. Much less research has tried to understand media effects on policy making. The consensus is that there is nothing straightforward about the media–policy nexus. Most scholars also agree that even if media may not determine the direction of policy decisions, they may well influence the visibility of issues (Cohen 1963). I look at four factors potentially affecting the media–policy nexus: influence on individual opinions, media-specific factors, issue attributes, and timing.

Media, Voters, and Policy Making

While early studies of media influence concluded that effects were at best "limited" (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944), subsequent work agreed that media at least influence what voters care about (Iyengar & Kinder 1987, McCombs & Shaw 1972, Scheufele & Tewksbury 2007). What voters care about may in turn affect their evaluation of candidates: As certain issues become more visible, especially during campaign periods, candidates are evaluated against their prospective performance on those issues (Iyengar & Kinder 1987). And this issue-based scrutiny may in turn affect the topics that candidates push during the campaign and eventually act on once elected. Similarly, the framing of issues may influence how we talk about solutions to policy problems (Shih et al. 2008, Soroka et al. 2012).

Most of the work in this tradition seeks to explain how people vote. The media effect on policy making is thus at best indirect: Parties or candidates promote specific issues and policies during campaigns, and voters express support for the party whose policy agenda they prefer through their vote; if voting is influenced by media, then media influence policies by influencing the vote decision. This line of reasoning, however, implies overcoming multiple obstacles. A first underlying assumption is that parties actually present a diverging set of policy proposals, possibly claiming ownership of certain policy topics or being perceived as owning them (Petrocik 1996, Walgrave et al. 2012). The reality of party competition, however, does not appear to allow for distinctive issue ownership, as parties tend to resort to issue-uptake strategies (Sulkin 2005), imitating their main rivals or niche parties (Abou-Chadi & Orlowski 2016, Green-Pedersen 2019). Moreover, governments and parliaments are often overwhelmed by the continuous flow of new problems and struggle just to keep up (Adler & Wilkerson 2013, Baumgartner & Jones 2005). Further, the issue ownership assumption implies that voters are both rational and cognizant of public policy—characterizations that have long been questioned due to the "maldistribution" of information (Converse 2000, pp. 333–34; also see Campbell et al. 1966). The most prevalent approaches to voting and political behavior assume that information processing is strongly influenced by pre-conceptions and social identity (Achen & Bartels 2017). Zaller (1992) admits that information may affect at least certain categories of voters. Alternatively, others consider that voters may rely on shortcuts, cues, and other potentially partial visions of reality (Popkin 2020). Even the most optimistic accounts do not assume that citizens are aware of most policies. Media may play an important role, as they comprise the main potential source of information regarding policy making (Barabas & Jerit 2009). This view of media's role assumes a highly informative media environment, another element that is far from obvious, as is shown below.

The hypothesis of a media–vote–policy nexus relies on the assumption that representatives and party elites are responsive to voters in their campaign messages and communication. Relatedly,

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[1]Originally titled *Propaganda Technique in the World War*, Lasswell's 1927 book was republished in 1971 under the title *Propaganda Technique in World War I*.

representatives must be able and willing to implement electoral promises and vote them into law. These two assumptions underlie the principle of responsiveness, which is said to be one of the fundamental aspects of representation (Pitkin 1967). Empirical work shows that there may be a trade-off between the clarity of the electoral mandate and the ability to hold politicians accountable (Powell 2004, Powell & Whitten 1993, Soroka & Wlezien 2010). Relatedly, recent work on party competition tends to argue that in contexts of electoral uncertainty, parties do not necessarily respond to voters but rather to rival parties (Green-Pedersen 2019, Grossman & Guinaudeau 2021).

Finally, even if responsiveness is warranted at the systemic level—and some authors argue that it is (Müller 2000, Soroka & Wlezien 2010, Spoon & Klüver 2014)—media may play an important role in ensuring that voters are aware of responsiveness. Even concerning the economy, arguably an area where most people have a direct experience and possibly a personal opinion (e.g., Erikson et al. 2002), media may influence judgments, possibly depressing the impact of facts (Barnes & Hicks 2018, Hetherington 1996, Lobo & Pannico 2020, Singer & Carlin 2013). Less surprisingly, media also influence opinions on more controversial issues such as immigration (Boomgarden & Vliegenthart 2009, Eberl et al. 2018) and crime (Graziano et al. 2010). A recent study shows that higher media attention may increase public awareness but at times also contribute to confusion (Neuner et al. 2019).

There is thus evidence of a media effect on the representative process that may indirectly influence policy making, mostly at the agenda setting stage, especially during pre- and postelectoral periods. Moreover, media may play a role at later stages, informing voters about the degree of responsiveness of policy making. The direction of the effect importantly depends on the priming and framing of issues, the specific policies, and the political actors defending or opposing them.

Media as a Player in Their Own Right

Media are of course not neutral, and that partly accounts for their varying influence on representation and possibly policy making. There has long been an argument in favor of studying media as an institution (Cook 1998, Schudson 2002, Sparrow 2006): Media represent a system with its own rules, dynamics, and actors. Variation of these elements affects both the content and form of coverage.

Newsworthiness is determined by the rules and constraints governing commercially oriented media. What is news depends on the specific news values dominating outlets and the profession (Harcup & O'Neill 2017). Beyond journalists, the media system plays a crucial role; it includes the market structure, possible ideological bias in reporting, and the structure of ownership, as well as the regulatory context (Hardy 2010). The specific mix of norms in a given system or at a given outlet is likely to favor certain issues or types of coverage of policy making and specific preexisting frames (Lee et al. 2008). These norms and constraints effectively amount to a form of gatekeeping, selecting and overemphasizing certain issues while discarding others. This gatekeeping also creates a hierarchy between actors due to varying levels of access to media (Shoemaker & Vos 2009). Unsurprisingly, privileged access to media is often linked to political power (Bennett 1996).

Ownership is fundamental in this context. Types of ownership strongly determine the public service orientation of news production (Benson et al. 2018, Picard & Van Weezel 2008). Commercial media cater to viewers' shortening attention spans, pushing them toward more entertainment or so-called infotainment. This emphasis on entertainment tends to increase strategic or horse-race coverage of politics (Dunaway & Lawrence 2015) or preference for negative news (e.g., Van der Meer et al. 2019) and favor more superficial coverage of policy issues and content.

Public media and media owned or controlled by civil society are less likely to be dominated by market pressure and commercial logic. This type of media ownership is said to raise the level of

public awareness and knowledge of politics and policy making (Curran et al. 2009). Technology also matters in this context. Different types of media, e.g., television, newspapers, and internet outlets, favor more or less in-depth coverage, possibly favoring reporting on some issues over others. This difference may in turn be reinforced by parallel commercial or economic constraints (Bennett 2004).

In summary, the combined effects of the rise of commercial media and changing media consumers may lead to more strategic coverage and focus on failure and conflict. Balanced reporting on policy making can be expected to be more difficult in this context. As many public media outlets have been privatized and many of the remaining public outlets have shifted to more commercial logic, policy coverage may become more biased and incomplete. Some authors argue, though, that in an increasingly hybrid environment, different logics are at work at different places (Brants & van Praag 2017).

More critical observers of media assume a much larger bias. Lippmann (1997, p. 195) was one of the first to see the power of media, claiming the need to put this power to good use in the interests of "a specialized class whose personal interests reach beyond the locality." From the very beginning, the "intelligent manipulation of the public mind through propaganda was an essential task for governing elites," according to this view (Robinson 2019, p. 2). Starting with a critique of the Creel Committee in which Lippmann participated, Herman & Chomsky (2010) have criticized the proximity of media to the political and economic realms. Even scholars who do not necessarily share Herman and Chomsky's conclusions agree that media pay disproportional attention to official sources when covering politics and policy making (see the section titled Governments and Elite Influence on Media). There may thus be an institutional bias in favor of scope-reducing interests, even in democratic settings.

Issue Attributes and Attention Cycles

Much of the influence of media may depend on and vary with specific issues and issue-specific attributes. Put differently, not only the issues we consider important, but also what we consider important about them, vary over time. For instance, unemployment may at times be seen as a macroeconomic problem, while at other times it is depicted as problem of individual employability or lack of mobility.

Again, the fields of political communication and policy studies contribute different elements, and attempts to connect the fields have been rare (but see Soroka 2002). The traditional study of issues in the field of public policy usually refers to some iteration of the Lowi–Wilson framework (Lowi 1964, Wilson 1980). The fundamental idea is that the specific stakes and dynamics of a given policy structure the distribution of costs and benefits and thus determine the fault lines of political conflict (e.g., Schneider & Ingram 1993). On the political communication side, the stress is on the reach and influence of news, i.e., the extent to which media consumers relate to a given issue (Zucker 1978). People more easily relate to the levels of unemployment or crime than, say, to the level of public debt (see the classic work by Carmines & Stimson 1980). Accordingly, media influence should be stronger on the former than on the latter (Soroka 2002), but the possible combinations of the two approaches have hardly been explored.

Other factors may come into play. Certain issues may have historical significance, such as inflation in Germany, leading to much greater political attention to this issue in Germany than in neighboring France (Lewis-Beck 1986). Similarly, issues may be associated with certain political actors or forces and thereby be more or less problematic for the incumbent administration (cf. supra, Lefevere et al. 2015, Petrocik 1996). However, we also know that the significance of issues is not stable over time. Media coverage may be subject to the "issue attention cycle" (Downs

1972): Issue attributes cannot be taken for granted and are subject to variation. It is generally acknowledged that media may temporarily raise awareness, even on technical issues such as the spread of infections or vaccine technology (Arendt & Scherr 2019), as evidenced by the COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) pandemic, or certain aspects of environmental problems and climate change (Arlt et al. 2011, Schmidt et al. 2013), especially with the help of "focusing events" or crises (Birkland 1998, Birkland & Lawrence 2009).

An original perspective on varying issue attention and policy making has been developed by Boydstun (2013), who explores the power of punctuated-equilibrium dynamics in media attention. She shows that feedback dynamics are at work with regard to the distribution of attention in a complex interaction among the media agenda, public opinion concerns, and the political or policy agenda. Coverage is not proportional, but often skewed and explosive, due to different forms of feedback (Baumgartner & Jones 2005). Growing media attention has been shown to accelerate policy making processes (Wolfe 2012), possibly favoring short-term over long-term solutions (Yanovitzky 2002). This may in turn structure the preference of policy communities or issue publics regarding the widening or limiting of the scope of conflict.

In a nutshell, different issues may be subject to different levels of media attention and pressure. Issue-level characteristics are not carved in stone, however. Crises or focusing events may upset the hierarchy of topics and have visible consequences for the policy making process.

Timing and the Policy Cycle

A fundamental question concerns the moment when media influence on policy making is most likely. Again, policy studies and political communication pay attention to different aspects. While much of the literature in public policy has focused on the traditional representation of the policy cycle, communication scholars have usually paid more attention to the dynamics of political competition, events, and communication. Influence on a given issue is more or less difficult in the context of an already overloaded media agenda.

While the heuristic power of the policy cycle has been contested, it remains a highly convenient way to think about the different stages of the policy making process (Jann & Wegrich 2007). Intuitively, given the extensive work on agenda setting (McCombs 2004, Cobb & Elder 1971), one could expect that the early stages are the most likely to see the influence of media. It is true that a host of actors try to mobilize in favor of—or against—putting certain items on the political agenda. Influence on policy making is said to be more difficult, and "friction" to be higher, the further down one moves in the decision making process (Jones et al. 2009). Possible media influence should thus diminish, even if media attention increases, from one stage of the policy making process to the next (Tresch et al. 2013).

Many aspects of the media–policy nexus are moreover codetermined by contextual elements and the specific dynamics of the political timeline. Elections, for instance, are a period of heightened attention for all relevant actors. Voters tend to seek information more actively, but in a context of massive mobilization of all stakeholders, this may simply make information more contradictory (Iyengar & Simon 2000). Moreover, media influence should be limited in this context, as party organizations, incumbents, and opponents invest all available resources in influencing the media agenda, and media are likely to be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information (Walgrave & Van Aelst 2006). The electoral cycle may thus have a moderating effect on possible media influence on policy making.

Finally, the media agenda, like any other agenda, is limited. An agenda that is already packed with issues does not absorb new issues as easily as it would during a slow news period. As agenda setting is a zero-sum game (Zhu 1992), attention paid to one issue means less attention paid to

another issue. A congested agenda automatically reduces attention to secondary issues, while a slow agenda allows for stronger coverage, which may in turn influence the media response. Eisensee & Strömberg (2007), for instance, have shown that media coverage of natural disasters in the United States is weaker if they coincide with certain types of events, such as international sports tournaments. The combined effects of agenda diversity and intensity are thus paramount to understand the likeliness of media influence on policy debates and policy making (Boydstun et al. 2014, pp. 176–77). Agenda congestion may also influence the propensity of other actors, such as opposition parties, to signal issues to media "for fear of being drowned out by other news stories" (Nyhan 2015, p. 442). Similarly, "media storms," i.e., "a sudden surge of attention to a specific topic... that is high in volume and... and lasts for a significant period" (Walgrave et al. 2017, p. 556; see also Boydstun et al. 2014) may durably upset attention patterns and thus constrain the likeliness of certain issues to make it to the top of the agenda.

Summary

1. Classic approaches to politics and elections assume at best an indirect effect of media on policy making. Media may influence voters by priming or framing certain issues, but these effects are likely to be limited.
2. Adopting a vision of media as an actor, with its own rules and dynamics, allows for a more nuanced perspective of media influence.
3. Beyond media, issues have a life of their own, with historical and cyclical elements codetermining their visibility and perceived importance over time.
4. The timing of politics also determines media's potential influence on policy making: an overloaded agenda may limit that influence.

GOVERNMENTS AND ELITE INFLUENCE ON MEDIA

In democratic settings, governments do not usually control the flow of information, but they benefit from a certain form of ascendancy in the public space. When it comes to reporting, media naturally pay more attention to incumbents and those that exercise authority. Government officials tend to use and abuse this privileged position to limit the scope of conflict and to pick the conflicts and prime the policies that are the most rewarding, electorally or in terms of more short-term popularity. In this section, I briefly look at the specifics of elite media use before looking at the conditions of government influence on media coverage.

The Media Power of Governments

Like voters, political and collective actors care a lot about media, but they have a more instrumental relation to media attention to the extent that media are the main locus of political competition. Political actors live in an inherently uncertain world regarding voter or citizen support and preferences. In this context, they tend to closely monitor media and event coverage to anticipate what other political actors might do and how citizens might react (Esser 2013). While politicians respond to news, their reaction is mediated by perceived "partisan usefulness" and public attention to issues (Sevenans et al. 2016). Those excluded from power—such as electoral losers, minorities, and cause groups—use media to try to change the scope of conflict. For instance, opposition forces are likely to be particularly responsive to bad news for government (Thesen 2013, Thesen et al. 2020) and generally make more aggressive statements than majority politicians (Haselmayer et al. 2019). More than voters, collective actors rely on media to implement strategies, publicize statements, and implement communication strategies. An increasing number of studies confirms that

media attention has a measurable influence on parliamentary debates (Vliegenthart et al. 2016a), social movements (Vliegenthart et al. 2016b), party strategies (Green-Pedersen & Stubager 2010), and even government agendas (Walgrave et al. 2008).

Conversely, collective actors, especially powerful ones, have a nontrivial influence on media attention. Gatekeeping mechanisms favor powerful actors as journalists try to back their reporting with authoritative statements, preferably from public authorities (Bennett 1990). The underlying reasons are straightforward. Governments run the administration, have better information, and are responsible for policy making. There are thus good reasons to assume that they are more aware of policy problems than most other actors are. Moreover, in democratic settings, they possess the electoral legitimacy to exercise policy-related functions. Consequently, they tend to have the first word on most issues. Bennett et al. (2006) provide a powerful example, analyzing the Abu Ghraib scandal. They show that, compared to media in less developed countries or in Western Europe, US media were very careful in the coverage of the leaked photos from the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, avoiding the use of the term torture. It took the Pentagon almost two weeks to devise a communication strategy. When it finally did, all major national media adopted the official account of events.

This deference may be due to the fact that the Abu Ghraib scandal was essentially a foreign policy issue. It is established that governments dominate in this area (Hallin 1986, Robinson 2001, Wolfsfeld 2011). Governments may even produce "pseudo events" (Daniel Boorstin quoted in Livingston & Bennett 2003, pp. 365–66) to manage the news and hope to increase their popularity and reelection chances, counting on rally-round-the-flag effects (Baum 2002, Hetherington & Nelson 2003).

Variations of Elite Influence on Media

The media power of elites is not limited to foreign policy, of course. Simply in the domestic context, the "indexing" power (Bennett 1990) of incumbent governments is much more likely to be contested.

Figure 1 is an extension of Hallin's (1986) and Robinson's (2001) model of the elite–media attention nexus. It argues that this nexus will be determined by the interplay of public awareness and elite attitudes toward given issues. I assume that media, despite their intrinsic interest in conflict, need to be fed conflict to report or amplify it. While this mechanism is particularly visible in the area of foreign policy, I see no reason to assume that other areas are not subject to the same logic. The patterns and scope of conflict are vastly different across policy areas. While opposition politicians may consent to downplay their opposition to the Iraq War (Bennett et al. 2008), they are much less likely to keep quiet on issues of domestic politics. Put differently, while the upper

Public awareness of the issue		Elite attitude	
		Elite consensus	Elite dissensus
	High	Media reflects consensus	Media amplifies dissensus
	Low	Little or no media coverage	Media may take sides and influence government

Figure 1

The influence of public awareness and elite attitudes on the media coverage of policy making.

left quadrant in **Figure 1** can be expected to dominate foreign policy, it is the upper right quadrant that is likely to dominate most other areas. I suspect that the "sphere of legitimate controversy" (Robinson 2001) is much larger on domestic issues, possibly fueled by long-standing divergence in points of view (Lefevere et al. 2015, Petrocik 1996). Political actors regularly attempt to re-define the cleavages of political debate and conflict in a manner that is more favorable to them. Government-authored frames are met by "counter-frames," and the degree of frame competition influences people's perceptions (Chong & Druckman 2007, 2013). These conflicts will be particularly strong for areas with high public awareness, as political actors may anticipate electoral gains or losses from priming certain issues.

Relatedly, policy scholarship may help refine existing conceptual frameworks in political communication concerning the relation between policy subsystem characteristics and public awareness of given issues. Public awareness of the vast majority of policy stakes is weak. This may at least partly result from deliberate scope-reduction strategies.

One could expect that a highly unified policy community would downplay disagreements to avoid public scrutiny on policy making. The lower left quadrant of **Figure 1** can be compared to "esoteric" (Moran 1991) or "quiet" (Culpepper 2011) politics, i.e., strategies of scope reduction regarding specific policies. Media attention can be seen as a danger to those strategies and may be pursued by actors who seek to expand the scope of specific issues beyond the dominant actors in each policy subsystem.

The lower right quadrant corresponds to the situation where public awareness is also weak, but elites have a hard time coordinating to keep an issue quiet. This is the only case in **Figure 1** where one might expect media outlets to take a side by priming minority or marginal points of view, thereby influencing the public agenda. Examples of such policy stakes include issues of great uncertainty or novelty, where governments may be more vulnerable or, simply, unprepared. This is particularly true for natural disasters that may overwhelm government capacities, as illustrated by Hurricane Katrina (Bennett et al. 2008, Eisensee & Strömberg 2007) or, more recently, the COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) pandemic. The latter amply illustrated governments' difficulties in keeping control of the news flow and limiting the spread of misinformation (Lovari 2020, Motta et al. 2020). This lack of preparation does not usually mean that the media take the lead on those issues, but reaction patterns may be more erratic, as the media may turn to relatively minor actors or experts.

In summary, under normal circumstances, authorities keep control of the media environment and the resulting scope of conflict. Authorities are able to frame the story to their own advantage, prime certain issues, and sometimes avoid talking about others. On most issues, however, government framing is contested. When that is the case, media coverage of governmental action naturally becomes less favorable. I expect similar patterns in areas where government is taken by surprise or is unprepared to respond to events or information. The role of the media will be greatest in this last case.

Summary

1. As media usually turn to governments first for information on policy making, governments have the opportunity to control the media flow to their own advantage.
2. This advantage is particularly strong when other political elites side with government officials or at least do not contradict them. A consensual signal from elites is usually amplified by media.
3. If elites are divided, however, or policy issues are uncertain and elites' positions are unclear, the role of media may be more critical.

4. Public awareness forces elites to address issues publicly, but in contexts of low awareness and elite consensus, they may choose to deliberately downplay an issue.
5. While these arguments have been applied mostly to foreign policy, I argue that they can and should be extended to all policy making.

GOVERNING, POLICY MAKING, AND THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The last two sections have discussed the different dimensions of the media–policy nexus. The relationship is interactive and may go through different phases with changing causal arrows. The rise of digital and social media has further complicated the equation. Rather than attempting to describe how the media landscape has changed in the past two decades, this section tries to spell out the most important implications of ongoing changes in the media landscape for policy making.

Social Media and Politics

The Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the election of President Donald Trump in the United States unleashed countless studies and journalistic accounts about the political consequences of social media. Even if we adopt a cautionary attitude, it is safe to assume that we are witnessing the emergence of a new, "hybrid" media system made up of "old" and "new" media logics (Chadwick 2017). This media system is more diverse and already has upset historical hierarchies in the media landscape. As Chadwick (2017, p. 286) puts it, "hybridity empowers and it disempowers," leading to a much more multicentric media landscape. Traditional news corporations must adapt, having lost much of their historical gatekeeping function (Jungherr et al. 2020), i.e., the capacity to control access to media and thereby to the mediated political public sphere. The rise of a "network media logic" may partially compensate for this loss of centrality for traditional outlets (Klinger & Svensson 2015). Overall, however, gatekeeping has declined (but see Meraz & Papacharissi 2013) following the rise of alternative media sources and the success of new media formats (Noam 2016).

Moreover, the rise of social media has dramatically diminished the cost of reaching potential sympathizers. This change appears to have facilitated social movement organization, as famously evidenced in the context of the mobilizations around Cairo's Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring (Tufekci & Wilson 2012). It also has dramatically diminished coordination costs for social movements through "connective mobilization" (Bennett & Segerberg 2013; see also Chadwick 2017, ch. 10). For political parties, the rise of social media represents an opportunity as well as a dilemma. New parties, such as the Spanish Podemos, tend to create a single membership status with full participation rights but no membership fee (Gomez & Ramiro 2019). However, this ease of membership appears to go along with much "weaker patterns of allegiance" (Margetts et al. 2015, p. 49).

A more negative consequence of the rise of social media and the decline of gatekeeping is the "democratization of truth" (Bennett 2017, p. 256):

> [W]hen those operating inside the system begin to play loose with facts, and when the audiences increasingly can choose what they want to hear, the barbarians have... effectively begun to operate inside the gates. The result is that truth becomes democratized and less subject to authoritative monitoring and gatekeeping. (Bennett 2017, pp. 257–58)

Formerly marginal political actors use the new media to access the public space and to shape their audience's perception of reality. This is particularly the case for populist political actors, mostly from the far right in advanced industrial democracies (Engesser et al. 2017). However, established politicians have increasingly imitated strategies of audience fragmentation and biased

framing (Heiberger et al. 2021). Like populist leaders, they increasingly target rather specific groups and promote strongly biased images, undermining common ground with other groups and threatening social cohesion. At the same time, politicians have been shown to increasingly follow social media signals (Barberá et al. 2019). And as traditional outlets follow social media–driven politicians, they may help amplify the misinformation that they spread (Waisbord 2018).

The democratization of truth is at least partly related to changes in the audience, too. The rise of the internet was seen by many as a promise for the democratization of media, a way to challenge the power of established elites and their capacity to control access to the mediatized public sphere (Trippi 2004). This optimistic vision is strongly contested today. Even if doubt has been cast on the echo chamber or cognitive bubble theses (Barberá et al. 2015), Song et al. (2020) have shown that social media users are often subject to the "news finds me" illusion. Convinced that "ambience news" (Song et al. 2020, p. 65), e.g., reposts of articles on their social media wall, are keeping them updated, they tend to consume news more superficially and are ultimately far less knowledgeable than people who actively seek news. Generally speaking, high-choice environments have been shown to increase the knowledge gap, facilitating news avoidance for some and access to more news for others (Aelst et al. 2017, Prior 2007, Shehata & Strömbeck 2018).

Effects on Policy Making

What do these changes mean for policy making? I assume that the rise of social media crucially enhances certain preexisting trends, while creating a series of new challenges for policy makers.

As shown above, media influence on policy relies on the assumption of a functioning chain of responsiveness. The increasing knowledge gap affects the very capacity of parts of the public to follow policy making and to stay aware of the main stakes. Moreover, as gatekeeping functions of classical media outlets weaken, the general coverage of politics and policy making is changing. Audience fragmentation and biased political speech may further increase confusion in reporting and preference formation processes, possibly favoring feelings of "inefficacy, alienation and cynicism" (Balmas 2014). Social media may partially compensate for the more diffuse influence of traditional outlets (Feezell 2018), but knowledge in this area remains limited.

For smaller groups, this more open media landscape is certainly an opportunity. "Connective action" (Bennett & Segerber 2013) clearly facilitates advocacy with regard to specific topics, including policy-related issues. Resorting to e-petitions, online mobilization proves increasingly successful and popular (Wright 2016). Governments now permanently monitor and often respond to demands and issues raised in social media (e.g., Bekkers et al. 2013). The more open media landscape has also helped shift public attention to issues that incumbent governments would have preferred to avoid, such as the social consequences of austerity and economic crises in the case of the Spanish Indignados (Anduiza et al. 2014, Theocharis et al. 2015). More recently, the Fridays for Future movement has stirred a multitude of high school students spanning large parts of the developed world (Boulianne et al. 2020).

For governments, as well as other political leaders, the social media revolution essentially corresponds to a lower level of control over the news flow. As mobilizations become less costly, a greater number of actors mobilize to affect the media agenda. Governments remain powerful players but are confronted with an ever-growing number of rival attempts to set the media agenda. Put differently, governments are increasingly forced to deal with a political agenda they no longer determine alone (Barberá et al. 2019, Gilardi et al. 2022). Whether this leads to an expansion or a contraction of the policy making agenda or the news agenda is a question for future research. It may, however, make governments' life more difficult to the extent that their actions and policy making are more exposed and their failures are primed more effectively and systematically than before.

An opposing argument states that governments may benefit from "more diffuse but weaker public scrutiny" (Mancini 2013, p. 56). Finally, governments may be tempted to resort to more polarizing or audience-fragmenting strategies, thereby probably further limiting communication on public policy making. The election of populist parties to government in a growing number of countries is favoring this trend (Engesser et al. 2017).

Summary

1. The rise of social media is changing the historical media–policy making nexus.
2. As the media system become more hybrid, historical outlets lose much of their gatekeeping capacity.
3. New actors emerge, exploiting the greater variety of outlets, often helped by mainstream politicians who pay growing attention to social media.
4. These changes have consequences for the type of information that circulates, leading to the democratization of truth.
5. Governments and classical political actors have less control over the media agenda and are more obliged to respond to demands emerging from social media.
6. Governments may be tempted to resort to audience fragmentation and biased discourse to regain some of the lost control.

INTEGRATING POLITICAL SCIENCE AND COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVES: DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Understanding the effects of the changing media landscape on the media–policy nexus is a daunting task. Based on the above discussion, I briefly develop several research directions based on the consequences of the transforming media landscape. Most of these are related to the way in which the rise of social and digital media may redefine political conflict.

A fundamental issue that has been highlighted by previous work and throughout this article is that the fields of political communication, public policy, and political behavior have developed original perspectives regarding the relation between public policy and media. But these fields do not talk to each other (Bennett & Pfetsch 2018, Wolfe et al. 2013), leaving unexplored several potentially interesting research directions. The rise of social media has increased the urgency of better coordination between those competing research agendas.

First and foremost, we have little knowledge about long-term trends in the coverage of policy making. Mapping of policy making coverage and understanding short-term and long-term dynamics are fundamental to a better understanding of citizens' awareness. Methodologies to study the policy–media link have been put forth but only partially exploited so far (Soroka & Wlezien 2019). As social media appear to pose potential threats to the quality of information (Aelst et al. 2017), it is important to better understand how their rise has affected the breadth of the coverage of public policy. We have seen that coverage is strongly skewed in favor of certain issues in traditional media (Boydstun 2013), but central questions remain. Has the rise of social and digital media affected the breadth of coverage? Are niche topics receiving more attention? Can minority groups more easily prime their pet issues? To the contrary, does the rise of social, more interactive media lead to more concentrated, but more short-lived coverage? A second, related dimension concerns the tone and frame of coverage. Has growing cynicism in social media led to more negative or cynical coverage of policy making?

Analyzing changes in media coverage of policy making could help address questions about the growing knowledge gap and its consequences for policy-related mobilizations. The knowledge

gap may weaken the propensity to mobilize among the less politicized. At the same time, studies on social movement organizations tend to show that mobilization has become simpler and less costly. We have much anecdotal evidence of the role of social media in mass protests, but we have little knowledge of the average effect this has had on policy-specific mobilizations. It would be interesting to know if certain issues benefit more from the new possibilities, e.g., the environment or gender equality. It is not clear that social media mobilization benefits long-standing issues such as wage bargaining, as these are less likely to go viral.

How do ongoing changes affect elite preeminence in media agenda setting? Put differently, if the changing media landscape has affected the possibilities and strategies for media outsiders, what about insiders? Logically, if conflict is more easily socialized and the scope of conflict more easily expanded, it should become more difficult for incumbent administrations and political leaders to keep control of the media flow. Government officials remain a privileged media source, though, and it is also to be expected that governments and other political actors invest heavily in mastering the challenge of social media. Some attention has been paid to how authoritarian governments use social media to manipulate public opinion and debate (Gunitsky 2015). There is no reason to assume that manipulation attempts are limited to authoritarian contexts. We need to understand better how government strategies develop—whether governments engage with a growing number of topics and actors or whether, to the contrary, they are tempted to use social media to undermine other stakeholders and claims.

In summary, we want to know how governments communicate about policy making in the digital age. The hybrid media system is multilayered, and a host of policy battles may be fought in parallel, as several possibly contradictory logics are at work. However, we need good case studies on important political battles and the role of social media. The pandemic that hit the world in 2020 provides numerous possible opportunities to further our knowledge about the relations between policy and media in the digital age.

When are policy making processes more vulnerable to media influence? This comparatively old question requires new research and new theoretical perspectives. It would benefit, as explained in the section titled Governing, Policy Making, and the Rise of Social Media, from a strengthened dialogue between media and policy scholars. While battles over the scope of conflict certainly remain central, the very definitions of scope and attention need to be rethought in the context of a radically changing media landscape. Moreover, while these processes were not well understood before, the rise of social media is adding new questions and puzzles to old ones.

Last but not least, future research will have to make decisions on how to study the three-or-more-way interactions between media, politics, policy making communities, publics, and other stakeholders. Advances in text mining and machine learning techniques, aided by the growing online availability of all political statements, provide abundant new opportunities to do more fine-grained and over-time analysis. At the same time, it is paramount that in-depth case studies continue to unearth the mechanisms underlying processes of changing media–policy interactions.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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