How to study social media agenda setting dynamics in a local government’s policy subsystem?

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Abstract

In this paper I set the stage for my PhD research into the role of social media in the agenda setting of a specific local governments’ policy subsystem: migrant integration. By reflecting on literature on agenda dynamics, I outline the directions for my own research. I adopt a social constructivist perspective on agenda setting and framing, arguing that social media constitute a new arena of policy debate that communicates policy issues and frames. Frame transfer takes place between the traditional media, social media, political and policy agenda, however, this is not a causal process.

To analyze agenda setting role of social media we need to look at formal and informal institutional dynamics of the policy subsystem. This first concerns a qualitative study into social media agenda dynamics: to what extent (attention allocation) and in what ways (framing) do social media attend to local integration issues? Second, I will compare to what extent this social media agenda corresponds with the political and traditional media. Third, I will inquire what considerations and practices local administrators have in using social media as input for policymaking.
Introduction

Major and minor examples of online activism have proved that social media have been successful in mobilizing support for issues and bringing them to the government’s attention (Howard & Parks 2012). By advocating new issue frames and pushing issues higher up the agenda, they have spurred policy change. Such accounts have raised interest among public administration scholars in the agenda setting potential of social media. Social media are increasingly used to contribute to the policy debate (Coleman 2005; Albrecht 2006; Wallsten 2007; Woodly 2008 Meraz 2009). Whilst these studies have convincingly shown that policy debate is present on social media and that spillover of these discussions to other media agendas takes place, the policy consequences of social media debate have remained unclear.

According to Wolfe et al. (2013) this knowledge gap can be explained by a disconnect between media studies and policy studies on agenda setting. Rogers and Dearing (1988) distinguish in this regard between agenda setting and agenda building. The main focus of public administration scholars is agenda building: how different actors – including the media – pursue their issues on the policy agenda. They have little attention for differences in media and the consequences of media logic for agenda setting (Altheide & Snow 1979). In contrast, media studies usually focus on the agenda setting power of media influencing the public agenda, having little attention for policy change. In my research I aim to overcome this disconnect by studying local policy agenda setting with respect to social media, traditional media and politics.

Before engaging in the study of social media agenda setting dynamics, it is important to reflect on ontological and epistemological issues concerning the nature of social media and their place in agenda setting processes contrary to more traditional bearers of the public sphere. The question that will be addressed in this paper is therefore an epistemological one: ‘How can we study the contribution of social media to the local government agenda in a specific policy sub system?’. Based on a reflection on agenda setting- and social media theory, I will present directions for my research into social media in agenda setting dynamics in a specific policy sub system of local governments. I will outline a research methodology consisting of a choice of perspective, a conceptual model, a set of research questions, and choices in data collection and methods.
**Agenda setting**

Agenda setting theory explains what issues and issue definitions reach the policy agenda (Cobb & Elder 1972; Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner & Jones, 2009[1993]; Jones & Baumgartner 2005). Studying policy agenda setting is important from the stance of democratic representation. A precondition for democratic representation is that decision-makers attend to the public agenda, i.e. the set of issues that members of the public perceive as salient and their interpretations of these issues. If the represented and the representatives prioritize and define issues differently, representation does not occur (Jones & Baumgartner 2005: 255). The public agenda is however not uniform or static and it cannot be directly observed by the government. Moreover, governments generally deal with an oversupply of information. Many potential policy issues are at play and they can be interpreted in many different ways. The policy agenda can however only attend to a limited number of issues at a time and has to choose between different issue frames (Simon 1957).

The public agenda is translated to the policy agenda via the public sphere (Habermas 1989 [1962]). The public sphere consists of different arenas in which policy debate takes place, for example courts, public commissions, councils of government, political party meetings, universities, magazines, newspapers, radio and television (Schön & Rein 1994). Politics and the media are traditionally regarded as bearers of the public sphere, elevating public opinions to the policy agenda (Cobb & Elder 1972). Media and politics are not mere communication channels, but they actively contribute to the creation of shared meaning of what issues are important and how they should be defined (Lievrouw & Livingstone 2002). They influence what issues decision-makers perceive as salient (agenda setting) and how they think about these issues (framing) (McCombs & Shaw 1972: 176). Issue frames usually entail a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or recommendation for a solution (Entman 1993: 52).

Agenda setting theory has been developed with regard to traditional mass media such as newspapers, radio and television, but remains largely untested with regard to social media (McCombs 2005; Meraz 2009). Every arena of policy debate has its own rules and discourse tends to conform to the locus where it takes place (Schön & Rein 1994). For many years, traditional media and political representation have been central to agenda setting research. Scholars analyzed for example newspaper and television publications and political party
programs and parliament hearings (Walgrave & Van Aelst 2006). Today, social media have become a new arena of policy debate bringing potentially different agenda dynamics to the table. In other words, they will have their own agenda logic of prioritizing and framing issues. In the following paragraph I will outline what is known about and expected of social media with regard to policy agenda setting.

**Social media and agenda setting**

‘Social media’ has become a popular buzzword that is used in many different ways. Some use it to refer only to a specific set of social networking sites, while others use it as a very general term including all kinds of digital technologies. In order to use it as a scientific concept, it is necessary to clearly demarcate what social media are and what they are not. I use the concept of ‘social media’ to describe a generation of media with certain technological features and social affordances. Taking into account the definitions of Lievrouw and Livingstone (2002) and Boyd and Ellison (2007), I define social media as online applications with a networked infrastructure that offer users the possibility to share user-generated content. They enable communication that is many-to-many instead of one-to-many – which is typical for traditional or mass media.

The actual forms in which social media exist and are used is not fully determined by technological features, but develops in relation to their social context. Technologies’ social affordances are dependent on how people are able and willing to appropriate technologies (Gibson 1979; Hutchby 2001). As a consequence, social media exist in different shapes and sizes (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010) such as social networking sites, weblogs, forums, picture-sharing sites and video-sharing sites. Social network sites are for example organized around personal networks whereas other social media such as particular forums and weblogs and are mostly organized around interest groups (Boyd & Ellison, 2008: 219). The conceptual boundaries between different social media and between what we would and would not call social media are becoming increasingly blurred. Today, social media platforms usually integrate multiple services such as status updates, chatting, photo- and videosharing. Also, many ‘Web 1.0’ applications now have a social component, such as a possibility to leave a review or an additional Facebook page or Twitter account that allows interaction with users.

Based on this conceptualization of social media, I argue that agenda setting power of social media is not inherent to the technology, but to the appropriation of this technology. Social
media should primarily be considered as a medium that is able to bring public opinions to the policy debate. They should not be considered as an actor or interest group in itself. At any moment in time social media are communicating a plethora of messages from many different communities of interest. Uitermark (2011) compared the ways in which the online political movement Anonymous operates with a rhizomatic movement: likeminded gather in flexible and short-during communities of interest that split up again as quickly as they were formed. When other issues are at stake, people will gather in different configurations. This probably also applies to other social media movements. Even though social media are not representative of all citizens, by this dynamic they make the public agenda more directly available to government officials (Hill & Hughes 1999; Jankowski & Van Selm 2000; Margolis & Resnick 2000; Dahlberg 2001; Papacharissi 2001; Chadwick 2008).

**Theoretical perspective**

Agenda setting can be studied from different perspectives, yielding different explanations of agenda setting power. Initially, policy making was considered to be rational process (Lasswell 1971). With regard to agenda setting theory, policymakers were perceived to be instrumentally rational in evaluating what problems to address and how to address them. This would mean that the ‘biggest’ problems would get highest priority and the most efficient and effective solutions would be chosen. From a behavioralist perspective, Simon (1947; 1957) asserted that the logic of governmental decision-making should be derived from psychology of human behavior. Exposure to a message – also referred to as priming - is seen as the explanatory mechanism for agenda setting. This perspective has long been dominant in media studies of agenda setting. During the 1980s, policymaking was thought of as essentially political (Coleman 1982). A plurality of actors is promoting their political interests and policy is the result of political power play.

During the 1990s a new perspective on policy processes emerged, based on the linguistic turn in 20th century philosophy. Decision making in governmental organizations is no longer seen as rational, behavioral or political. Base on a social constructivist perspective, it is argued that different interpretations of issues are socially constructed. Issue frames gain discursive power that exists independently of political actors (Berger & Luckmann 1972). Different positions in the policy debate are resting on underlying structures of belief, perception and
appreciation, which we call frames (Schön & Rein 1994: 23). ‘A frame is a way of selecting, organizing, interpreting and making sense of a complex reality to provide guideposts for knowing, analyzing, persuading and acting. A frame is a perspective from which an amorphous, ill-defined, problematic situation can be made sense of and acted on.’ (Rein & Schön 1993: 146). As frames are built from facts, values, theories and interests, they are inherently controversial. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith’s (1993) introduced the concept of advocacy coalitions to describe a collective of actors sharing a policy frame within a policy subsystem.

How are policy controversies resolved and may policy change take place? According to a social constructivist perspective, this requires actors to be reflexive to their own and alternative issue frames in a changing policy context (Schön & Rein 1994). Changing circumstances and new information outside the policy subsystem will enforce such reflection and dominant frames may be revised (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Baumgartner and Jones (2009[1993]; 2005) Baumgartner and Jones’ theory of punctuated equilibria argues that new information on policy issues is long ignored due to disproportionate information processing of the policy subsystem. Institutional forces constrain policy reactions to new information that doesn’t fit the existing problem definition. However, at a certain point, new information can no longer be ignored and the policy equilibrium is roughly disturbed by policy frames arriving on the agenda. Punctuations occur when the policy process is catching up with changing reality. In the next paragraph I outline how I use this theoretical perspective to develop my conceptual model.

Conceptual model
I will study the role of social media in agenda setting processes from a social constructivist perspective, focusing on the local level of governance and on a specific policy subsystem. On the macro political level of national or federal governance – the level of most public administration studies on agenda setting issues are framed in general policy images, narratives and symbols (Kingdon 1984; Edelman 1985; Baumgartner & Jones 2009 [1993]; Jones & Baumgartner 2005; Stone, 1989, 2002; Wolfe et al. 2013). The specialized sphere of policy subsystems and the local level of governance will however provide us more systematic insight in the process of agenda setting and the role of social media (Wolfe et al. 2013: 182). This level of analysis allows us to look at opposing frames and the evolution of policy debate concerning specific issues instead of
comparing more general institutional action frames or metacultural frames that are probably less contested (Schön & Rein 1994). Additionally, it demarcates a specialized community of institutions and actors whose policy response can be studied.

In my conceptual model I include traditional media, social media and local politics as central bearers of the public sphere. In contrast to other arenas of policy debate that consist of experts (courts, universities, councils of government), these three arenas have the potential to represent all citizens. From a constructivist perspective, social media, traditional media and politics do not simply transfer information to the policy agenda, but they also contributing to different issue frames. A two-step process of selection and interpretation takes place: First, media and politics allocate attention to a selection of information and provide certain frames. Second, policy makers do the same based on media and political information coming to them. This can be visualized in the following conceptual model (figure 1):

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

This conceptual model depicts the following: information on (potential) policy issues enters the policy subsystem through the three main bearers of the public sphere: traditional media, politics and currently also social media. This information can be the occurrence of ‘focusing’ or ‘triggering’ events (Cobb & Elder 1972; Downs 1972; Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner & Jones 2009 [1993]; Birkland 1997; 1998) or it can come for example from opinion polls, scientific publications or government sources (Gans 1979). The policy agenda cannot attend to all information that is available outside the policy subsystem. Therefore it is constituted based on this filtered and weighted information that media and politics have pre-selected. The issue frames in the media or in politics are not necessarily filtered based on relevance, but for what is
interesting (Linsky 1986). The concept of ‘media logic’ describes how media filter and display information (Altheide & Snow 1979). Focusing events provide a ‘window of opportunity’ for issue advocates seeking policy changes through the channels of media or politics (Kingdon 1984).

Within the policy subsystem, the agendas constituted by traditional media, social media and politics do not operate independently, but there may be agenda spillover between them. This becomes clear from corresponding issue priorities and frames. The policy agenda is not a direct, causal result from media and political agenda’s but and interactive process of disproportionate information processing takes place in the policy subsystem. ‘Media attention sometimes precedes and sometimes follows changes in attention by government agencies. [...] Each can affect the other, reinforcing the pattern of positive feedback and punctuated equilibrium’ (Baumgartner & Jones 2009 [1993]: 125). The policy agenda, traditional media agenda, social media agenda and political agenda will mutually influence each other by policy debate in the policy subsystem. This may cause issue priorities and frames on the policy agenda to shift, leading to policy change.

Case: Migrant integration
The policy field of local migrant integration demarcates policy subsystem that will function as the case in my research design. Migrant integration policies deal with the position of immigrants and ethnic minorities in society. This policy field entails many policy issues that have gained and lost attention over time such as socio-economic deprivation, racism and discrimination, educational achievements and socio-cultural conflicts. This policy field of migrant integration is not fixed and regarding all migrant integration issues, multiple issue frames exist. This makes migrant integration a ‘wicked policy problem’ (Rittel & Webber 1973) or an ‘intractable policy controversy’ (Schön & Rein 1994; Scholten 2012). As integration policies are increasingly developed and implemented on the local level of governance (Alexander 2003; 2007; Penninx et al. 2004; Penninx 2009; Caponio & Borkert 2010), migrant integration is a suitable policy field to study social media in local governance specifically.

Initially my research focuses on the local context of Rotterdam, the second largest city in the Netherlands that is known for its highly multi-ethnic population. Rotterdam’s integration policies have undergone notable changes during the past decades and has often been considered
to be innovative and leading in national policy change. If the project provides the opportunity, I would like to add Antwerp as a second local context in my research, making international comparison possible.

**Research questions**

As stated, my research focuses on the role of social media in constituting the policy agenda. I will address the following research question: *In what ways does policy debate on social media contribute to agenda setting of local governments with regard to the policy subsystem of migrant integration?* As a result of the perspective I have chosen and the conceptual model that I have drawn, three sub questions can be formulated in order to answer this research question.

First I will study: *To what extent and how does the social media agenda respond to information on migrant integration issues?* Theory indicates that every arena of policy debate, elevating information from the policy environment to the policy subsystem is characterized by its own discourse (Rein & Schöhn 1993). Social media are a new arena of policy debate and can be expected to have their own agenda dynamics of prioritizing and framing issues. I will answer this sub question by reconstructing the issue attention cycle of the local social media agenda regarding migrant integration issues (cf. Downs 1972) and by qualitatively assessing issue frames that are communicated through social media.

Second, I will study: *To what extent and how do the agenda dynamics of social media correspond with the political and traditional media agenda?* Here I turn to the issue of intermedia agenda setting and agenda spillover (Walgrave & Van Aelst 2006; Vliegenthart & Walgrave 2008). By comparing the issue attention cycles for similar triggering events between the mass media, social media and political agenda and by searching for references that these agendas make to each other I will analyze how closely these agendas are related. We should not consider this to be causal processes in which frames are imposed on other agendas, but as a system of frame reflection and mutual feedback (Schöhn & Rein 1994; Wolfe et al. 2013). I will look at how information outside the policy subsystem fits certain agenda’s.

Third, I will study: *To what extent and how do policy makers in the policy subsystem of migrant integration use social media as input for policy formulation?* This question is key to evaluate how agenda dynamics and interactions in the policy subsystem eventually lead to policy change. I aim to understand the considerations of policy makers in consulting social media vis-à-
vis traditional media or politics. How do they value for example the trustworthiness and selectivity of social media? Instead of assuming a one-directional, causal relationship between the social media and policy agenda I will focus on disproportionate information processing and institutional feedback to information. This concerns inquiring about formal and informal procedures of using social media information.

**Data and method**

My participation in the ‘UniteEurope’ research and development project provides me with the opportunity of using a social media analytics tool to collect social media content on migrant integration (www.uniteeurope.org). Traditional media data will be collected through LexisNexis and other media archives. Minutes from the city council and relevant council committees will offer insight in the local political agenda.

Over a period of one year (September 2013-September 2014) I will collect data on migrant integration issues from these sources based on linguistic searches. During this period I expect several triggering events of migrant integration to occur. Boolean word searches reveal several trigger events that have reached the policy subsystem either through mass media, social media or local politics. Based on this quantitative mapping of attention, I will analyze the agenda dynamics of the social media agenda and compare this to the agenda dynamics of traditional media and local political debates. This quantitative approach to agenda dynamics will be combined with the qualitative method of frame analysis (Schön & Rein 1994) to analyze to what extent frames of social media discussions and traditional media reports and political debates differ or align. I evaluate the prioritization and framing of the issue on the three agenda’s by looking at problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or recommendation for a solution (Entman 1993: 52; Snow & Benford 1988). I will also look for references to other agenda’s. This will offer insight in the logic of the social media agenda and its correspondence with the traditional media and political agenda. In order to answer the third sub question, I will use the method of qualitative semi-structured interviews to ask local policymakers how they used social media as input concerning these specific triggering events.

**References**


