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# The contingency of governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere: A systematic literature review and meta-synthesis

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## ABSTRACT

The influence of the virtual public sphere in the policy process is not only dependent on the power of online media and the stakeholders who are using them. The responsiveness of governments to online policy debate is important as well. While some studies show examples of governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere, others find that online participation is largely ignored. Such contrasting findings point at a contingency of governments' responsiveness to online public debate. This article offers a systematic literature review and meta-synthesis of empirical articles that provide insight in the factors accounting for governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere. A theory-based analytical framework served as guideline for qualitative analysis of the findings of 39 studies. We found that institutional characteristics, characteristics of the policymaker, characteristics of online participation and characteristics of the policy domain are relevant conditions for governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere.

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## 1. Introduction

Online media have recently become popular platforms of civic engagement. Citizens are using online media to inform themselves about policy issues and government actions, form political opinions, mobilize support from others and voice their needs and preferences to policymakers (Bohman, 2004; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlgren, 2013). While some examples of online activism were successful in influencing the policy process, many others have quietly vanished and did not spur policy change (Howard & Parks, 2012). Policymakers thus are responsive to public opinion that is voiced online in some cases, but not in others. This raises the question under what circumstances online civic engagement is able to influence policies by communicating public opinion to policymakers, being politicians or administrators.

This question is at the core of public sphere theory. Structural characteristics of the internet have spurred optimistic expectations for the emergence of a virtual public sphere as they provide a contemporary version of Habermas' (1991) historical blueprint of the public sphere (Bohman, 2004; Coleman, 2005; Dahlgren, 2005). This democratic potential has been present during earlier years of the internet (often referred to as Web 1.0) in the form of online discussion forums and bulletin boards. In recent years, the user-friendly design and popularity of social media or Web 2.0 has revived scholarly debate concerning a

virtual public sphere (Dahlgren, 2009; Loader & Mercea, 2012). Even though Habermas' concept of the public sphere has been criticized for its feasibility and Habermas himself never pointed at the web as the ideal platform for the public sphere, many other scholars did (cf. Dahlgren, 2009: 158). Dahlgren (2005: 151) for example refers to the net as the 'vanguard' of the public sphere.

From the 1990s onwards, when democratic legitimacy was perceived to be under pressure, the idea of a virtual public sphere emerged as a promising alternative. At that time, voter turnout and political participation via formal channels of representation in representative democracy was in decline. Some scholars have argued that the creation of a virtual public sphere would overcome this 'democratic deficit' or 'crisis in citizenship' (Dahlgren, 2005; Coleman & Blumler, 2009). Although the technological basis of the internet and online applications may allow for open and egalitarian debate among citizens and more direct exchanges with policymakers (Bohman, 2004), the creation of a virtual public sphere could not be taken for granted. Many scholars questioned the quality of the online debates within this sphere, due to the fragmentation of online publics, inequalities in access and participation and levels of interaction (Dahlberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2004; Albrecht, 2006; Hindman, 2009; Goldberg, 2011).

Next to studying aspects of this 'digital divide' (cf. Norris, 2001; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004) related to online civic engagement such as access to and quality of online public debate, it is important to study the links between this arena of the public sphere and the policy process. Dahlgren (2001: 37) stated that: *'the relationship of political structures and the decision-making processes to the public sphere*

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is of central concern. [...] A blooming public sphere does not guarantee a democracy; it is a necessary but not sufficient ingredient.' There must be a structural link between online communicative spaces and the centers of decision-making in the form of processes of agenda setting and feedback (Kingdon, 1984; Baumgartner & Jones, 2009). The virtual public sphere is not functional unless policymakers are responsive to needs, opinions and preferences that are voiced online.

The influence of the virtual public sphere on policymaking processes has been less explored and does not yet form a coherent research tradition. Scholars have approached this question with diverse methodologies and have come to different results. Some studies demonstrate examples of governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere while others find that online debate is largely ignored. Such contrasting findings point at a contingency of governments' responsiveness to online public debate (cf. Manza & Cook, 2002). This calls for further research into the factors that account for governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere. Based on a meta-synthesis of empirical findings in the literature thus far, this paper aims to study under what conditions governments are responsive to online political participation by citizens.

The following research question is used as a guideline for systematic literature review and meta-synthesis: *What factors account for the responsiveness of governments towards policy debate in the virtual public sphere?* Meta-synthesis of earlier research findings allows us to construct a state-of-the-art of empirical knowledge and explicate theorization on this subject. In the following section, we develop an analytical framework to support our analysis of empirical findings with regard to three categories of factors. In section three we discuss our research design, being a meta-synthesis of a systematically collected sample of earlier studies. In section four the results of our analysis are presented. In section five conclusions are drawn and an outlook for further research is given.

## 2. Government's responsiveness to the virtual public sphere

At the core of democratic theory is the argument that citizens should be able to influence the policies that govern their lives (Held, 1996; Dahl, 2000). This requires that policymakers are responsive to public opinion. Responsiveness is defined as *'the congruence of collective public attitudes towards political issues with the policy preferences and actions of elected representatives'* (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2005: 380). This entails an outcome-oriented definition of responsiveness that is dominant in political representation and agenda setting literature. It operationalizes responsiveness as the extent to which policymakers change their policy positions or spending based on shifts in public opinion (Stimson, MacKuen & Erikson, 1995; Manza & Cook, 2002; Burstein, 2003; Wlezien, 2004; Baumgartner & Jones, 2009). However, next to being an outcome in terms of policy change, responsiveness can also be defined as a policy practice which relates to a community of policy makers who share specific policy beliefs, routines and other practices, or to the attitude of individual policymakers (Aberbach & Rockman, 1994). Responsiveness is then defined as the practice of taking into account the (variety) of changing needs, wishes and claims of citizens and societal groups, which is very often expressed through issue saliences (Burstein, 2003). Responsiveness as a policy practice can be recognized in processes of policy making regardless of whether this eventually results in policy change. In our meta-synthesis of studies on governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere, we will also take this forms of responsiveness into account.

Based on e-democracy and political representation literature we have formulated an analytical model that can help us to analyze the relevant literature. This model is based on three types of characteristics that seem to be relevant in order to assess the government's responsiveness to (online) public opinion, which are: policymaker, institutional and online participation characteristics (Fig. 1).

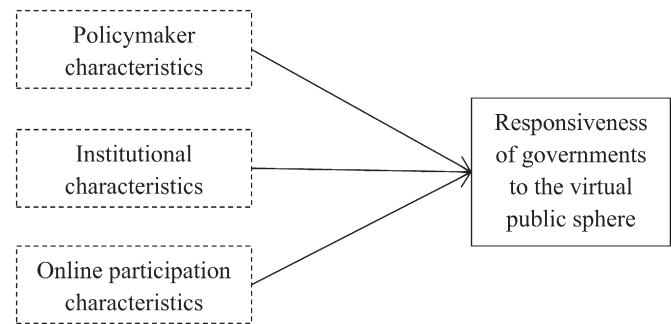


Fig. 1. Analytical framework.

In the literature, three types of characteristics are deemed relevant determinants of governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere. Firstly, it is expected that individual policymakers in politics and administration differ in their responsiveness to the public sphere. They are generally dealing with a 'bottleneck of attention' (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009). They cannot attend to all information that reaches them, so they need to select and prioritize. Based on personal experience, skills and preferences they will attend differently to online participation. For elected representatives, responsiveness is relevant with regard to their political position. Politicians have the incentive to take into account the policy preferences of voters to reduce the risk of electoral loss and the risk of public reprisals in the form of civic disobedience or protests (Brooks & Manza, 2006: 475; Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2005).

Secondly, institutional characteristics of the policy domain also influence responsiveness to the virtual public sphere. By this we mean organizational practices as well as the structure of the policy domain. Government organizations have different formal and informal rules and knowledge infrastructures in dealing with online information (Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013). Also, the availability of budget and technological tools in organizations is a factor that may explain responsiveness to the virtual public sphere. Political and administrative power relations, norms and values influence whether policymakers are responsive to online publics or not. Some policy domains are dominated by vested interests and interest groups who have created a certain policy tradition, while other domains are more open to external voices (Manza & Cook, 2002: 653). Recent studies have also shown the relevance of differences of representative systems, level of decentralization, proportionality of electoral systems, the level of political contestation and government popularity (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2005, 2008; Soroka & Wlezien, 2012). They prove that institutional characteristics are important mediators of the connection between public opinion and policy.

Thirdly, characteristics of online participation are relevant as well. It can be expected that online media and uses of these media differ in agenda setting power. Dahlgren (2005) argues that online media vary in the degree in which they comply with the structural, representational and interactional dimension of the public sphere. They have different designs and features (structural dimension), reach different publics and differ in popularity/participation (representational dimension) and differ in quality of argumentation and power to mobilize others (interactional dimension). Therefore, they will garner different degrees of government attention. With regard to the representational dimension of the public sphere, Fraser (1992) makes a distinction between strong and weak publics. This can be linked to the three tier distinction that Miège (2010) makes when discussing a layered public sphere. At the top is the elite sphere, with the organs of the state together with legislatures and the upper echelons of the corporate sector. Political discussion is linked to decision-making powers; it is a 'strong' public sphere or a strong public. The middle tier is the mainstream public sphere, mostly played out in the mass media; vested interests, parties, and other actors

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