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## Social media hypes about agro-food issues: Activism, scandals and conflicts

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## ABSTRACT

Events and controversies in the agro-food domain frequently generate peak selective activity on social media. These social media hypes are a concern to stakeholders because they can affect public opinion and policy, and are almost impossible to predict. This study develops a model for analysing social media hypes and builds a typology to provide insights into the dynamics of social media hypes in the context of agro-food governance. Five cases of peak social media activity in the Dutch livestock sector are analysed along four dimensions: (1) peak patterns of activity, (2) issues and frames, (3) interaction of actors, and (4) media interplay. An analysis of the dimensions and the interrelations across cases shows that social media hypes revolve around activism, scandals, and conflicts – each with characteristic patterns of activity, framing, interaction and media interplay. Hypes do not just result from important events in the sector, but are generated through the use of organizing concepts with a hashtag to evaluate and establish occasions. Peak activity thus revolves around a few themes and is recurrent and judgmental. Moreover, stakeholders play an active role in instigating and framing social media hypes. Our results show the need to adopt a proactive and interactive approach that transcends the view of social media as a mere communication channel to respond in crisis situations.

### 1. Introduction

Food and farming gain wide public and media attention. Public concerns about food safety and transparency, distrust in the agro-food industry and controversies around sustainability make agro-food an exciting topic for news media stories. Scandals, scares and crises, in particular, can generate waves of media attention. These events incite public indignation, engender journalistic research, provoke reactions and actions from stakeholders, and together generate a wave of media messages. A wave of media attention generated by such self-reinforcing processes is captured by the concept of media hype (Ginneken, 2003; Vasterman, 2005; Wien and Elmelund-Praestekaer, 2009). Media hypes shape public information dissemination as only some information is selected, emphasized or repeated. This can impact risk perceptions, public opinion and decision-making processes of stakeholders in the agro-food sector (Randall, 2009).

With the rise of social media the dynamics of public information flows have changed, as well as the relation between the media, stakeholders and the public. The interactivity of social media enables people to self-produce, -direct and -select information (Castells, 2011). Information is not only produced and disseminated by news media, but also constructed through the continuous interaction between individuals on online networks, including journalists, farmers, politicians, retailers, and citizen-consumers. It is unclear however, what the key

dynamics are that lead to peak selective activity on social media. While news media are limited by media space (the coverage of one news-item is at the expense of another) and target a mass audience (creating stories of interest for a wider public), the open and interpersonal communication on social media is likely to generate different, more dispersed, more diverse and more erratic peak activity. Yet it is unclear what issues generate peak activity, how these issues are framed, and who is involved.

This study aims to provide insights into the dynamics of peak selective activity on social media in the context of agro-food governance. As there is no established theory on social media hypes, we first develop a model to analyse cases of peak social media activity. Then, by analysing and comparing five cases in the Dutch livestock system along four dimensions, we identify overall patterns of hypes and distinguish three types of hypes. The typology serves as a heuristic device to understand, explain and anticipate the dynamics of social media hypes in the agro-food domain.

### 2. Livestock farming and food production in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, the stakes in the agro-food sector are high and diverse. Despite its small size and high population density, it is the world's second largest exporter of agricultural products and represents a technologically advanced and knowledge intensive agro-food system

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(CBS, 2017; Wageningen Economic Research, 2017). As in most countries, citizens are moving to the cities, which leads to a growing physical and psychological distance between consumers and producers and between people's living environment and agriculture. Citizen-consumers demand safe and sustainable food and a green and clean living environment, while farmers and retailers compete in an increasingly global food market. In this context, social media form an important public stage where people with different interests and ideas come together to communicate about agro-food issues and build support or opposition for agro-food institutions, policies and products (Stevens et al., 2016).

Our social media analysis from 2011 to 2015 indicates that issues related to the sustainability of animal farming and food production generate the highest levels of social media activity in the agro-food domain. Hence, to enable the interpretation and comparison of social media hypes in a particular governance context, we focus on the Dutch livestock and food production system, from farmer to consumer. The livestock sector in the Netherlands has witnessed major changes in policies during this period, such as a new animal welfare law (July 2014), the abolition of the milk quota (April 2015), environmental policies and the introduction of land-based growth. Moreover, several crisis situations occurred, such as food fraud in meat processing, antibiotics in cattle-fodder, and incidents of cattle diseases; although there was no major outbreak of a zoonotic disease that affected public health (Rijksoverheid, 2016). These political processes and events create a communication space that provides an opportunity for stakeholders to influence each other and the public. Farmers, retailers, sector organisations, politicians, governmental organisations, interests groups and citizen-consumers can discuss various issues, events and policies on social media. There are two notable actors in this field: the Party for the Animals (PvdD), which is the first political party in the world with parliamentary seats focused primarily on animal rights; and Wakker Dier, which is an animal welfare activist organisation focussed on campaigning for public awareness raising. This forms the context in which social media activity is interpreted: what policy or crisis events generate peak activity? what issues are discussed and who is held responsible? what actors are involved and what frames do they use? and what is the role of news media, Facebook and Twitter?

### 3. Theoretical framework

The rapid, networked interaction is a key characteristic of social media that generates volatile dynamics. Peak online activity has received wide academic attention, covered by studies on trending topics (Choudhury et al., 2010), emergent hashtags (Lin et al., 2013), and information, emotion, or meme diffusion in social networks (Kim et al., 2013; Ratkiewicz et al., 2011; Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2013). To explain or predict peak selective activity, studies tend to differentiate between endogenous driven activity (by internal dynamics or propagation through networks) and exogenous driven activity (responses to external stimuli, such as news) (Lehmann et al., 2012; Oka et al., 2014). A study on bursting behaviour on Twitter shows that each key-term has a critical threshold: below this threshold bursts are endogenous and increase along with a baseline fluctuation, but above this threshold bursts are exogenous and unpredictable (Oka et al., 2014). Similarly, exogenous factors form the main driver of peaks in the use of hashtags (Lehmann et al., 2012). Although these studies provide insights into the dynamics of social media platforms (internal factors that predict activity), the recurring significance of 'exogenous' factors also shows the necessity to consider the wider context to explain peak selective activity. In addition to interactions within social media networks, events and news media coverage are important factors that generate peak activity on social media (Bandari et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2013; Oka et al., 2014; Yang and Leskovec, 2010).

In media studies, the concept of 'hype' is used to understand how peak selective attention emerges from self-reinforcing processes, such

as self-referential media systems, positive feedback loops between media reports and social responses and social amplification through framing processes (Elmelund-Praestekaer and Wien, 2008; Vasterman, 2005; Wien and Elmelund-Praestekaer, 2009). The concept originated from the need to explain news waves that not just represent reality, but (co-)create reality through amplification. To find explanations for hypes the theoretical framework considers peak patterns, framing dynamics, and media-interplay (Vasterman, 2005). However, the lack of a common definition or selection method for identifying a hype – and consequently the lack of case-comparisons – has led to conceptual ambiguity (Wien and Elmelund-Praestekaer, 2009). Moreover, the underlying supposed distinction between media events (representation) and news events (reality), news production and consumption, and thus between media and social responses is based on the model of mass media ('news production') and of limited use for understanding peak selective activity on social media. Studies that do use the concept for online communications, apply it to analyse the interplay of media (Hellsten and Nerlich, 2010; Hellsten and Vasileiadou, 2015), without considering framing strategies of social media accounts.

Hence, to understand social media hypes in a governance context, we need to combine hype theory and social media studies, and conceptualize social media not as a media system with intrinsic dynamics but as a space that is partly shaped by the strategic actions of actors. To this purpose, we look into four dimensions:

#### 3.1. Peak patterns of social media activity

Empirical studies on hypes suggest a common structure of peak patterns (Vasterman, 2005; Wien and Elmelund-Praestekaer, 2009). In 'An anatomy of media hypes', Wien and Elmelund-Praestekaer (2009) conclude that media hypes begin with a trigger event, last approximately three weeks and come in several, usually three, waves of decreasing intensity. This peak pattern results from self-reinforcing processes in news media attention and differs from daily news reports that do not activate these self-reinforcing processes (relatively short peaks of media activity) and from continuing media coverage on broader topics that report on multiple events (relatively long and steady heightened media coverage). Issues can also remain on the public agenda after an attention cycle (Downs, 1972) and can be activated for a new cycle (Newig, 2004). This means hypes do have the potential to generate recurring waves of media activity, for example when a news theme – a unifying concept that functions as a frame of reference – is used to link events or issues.

Peak patterns on social media differ from news media for several reasons, such as differences in type of communication, audience and publishing space. We thus do not build on the 'anatomy of media hypes' (Wien and Elmelund-Praestekaer, 2009), but study the key aspects of peak patterns, considering the intensity (height), duration (length) and structure (recurring waves) of activity. This indicates the level of attention for the issue, how long the heightened activity endures (usually through reinforcing interactions), and whether the issue generates recurrent waves of activity (possible phases in the evolution of a hype).

#### 3.2. Framing: linking events, issues and actors

In hype research and studies on peak social media activity, the concept of framing is generally used to study framing-processes over time, such as amplification and magnification (Vasterman, 2005), or frame-alignment (van der Meer et al., 2014). In this study, we are more concerned with the strategic actions of actors, and the social meaning and implications of frames (Entman, 2003). Frames select and order information and help to make sense of the world (Goffman, 1981; Vreese, 2005; Weick, 2001). Especially when situations are ambiguous or 'new' in some way (e.g. unusual, disruptive, repugnant) there is a high need to structure or accommodate information into an interpretative frame. This can lead to framing contests to interpret events,

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