Who cares about regulation? Interest networks of EU agencies on Twitter

Introduction:

As a response to the claims of interest capture, democratic deficits, and questions of legitimacy in policymaking processes, the EU has attempted to increase citizen participation through various tools. However, despite some exceptions[[1]](#footnote-1), we have seen little success in this domain. Through the advent of social media and Web 2.0, many academics and politicians foresaw a novel promising new tool to enable more citizen participation in political and regulatory affairs (Lusoli et al. 2006; Chadwick 2006; Gane and Beer 2008). For instance, Australian Senator Kate Lundy (an internationally recognized advocate of e-government) stated in 2010 that “Web 2.0 of the democratization of innovation and decision-making, […] will make us all co-designers of civil society in the 21st century” (SOURCE). The limited amount of research on the actual use and performance of collaborative internet fora for government-citizen interaction suggests that the reality cannot live up to the expectations (Brainard and McNutt 2010; Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia 2012). While there is a growing body of research investigating the supply-side of e-government fora for citizen participation (Mergel and Bretschneider 2013; Khan et al. 2014; Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia 2012; Brainard and McNutt 2010), the demand-side – the citizens - has received relatively little attention. The question here is: Even if a government offers an online forum for government-citizen interaction, is there a demand by citizens for such a forum? Furthermore, is the group using such online fora any different to the groups that are already engaged in regulatory policymaking (e.g. through consultation mechanisms such as workshops or public consultations).

There are two important reasons why we should know if it is possible and desirable to include citizens in policymaking through the possibilities that the Web 2.0 is offering: (1) It could increase the legitimacy and visibility of regulatory institutions by encouraging more citizen engagement in policymaking[[2]](#footnote-2) and (2) it could offer additional policy input through the crowdsourcing of the information retrieval process in policymaking. This paper relies on a dataset of the posting activity, the posted content, and the followership of all EU regulatory agencies active on the social media platform Twitter. Using classification algorithms enables me to identify the audience of these Twitter profiles and the types of interaction that occur between the EU agencies and the Twitter users. TBC

Literature review

In the political communication literature, we find reasons to believe that social media positively influences citizen engagement in political affairs (and indirectly in policymaking): It has been found that the emergence of new online technologies has led to more citizen engagement (Skoric et al. 2016) and an active role of online audiences in discussions and voting (Van Zoonen 2004). The nature of the link between social media use and participation in civic and political life is not clear: Whilst a meta-study of 36 studies on the subject showed that 80% of the coefficients were positive, no study could show if the positive effect of social media on civic and political participation was causal or transformative (Boulianne 2015).

* Premise: “Regulation is boring”
  + We do not know much about who cares about regulatory affairs, but in many papers on agency independence it is often assumed that regulatory decision-making is out of sight for the public since it is quite technocratic and often not relevant to the average citizen (e.g. Rourke 1979; Bertelli et al. 2015).
  + An often implicit assumption is that EU agencies were created as independent bodies and usually stay out of public sight to ensure a continuation of this independence
    - Following this logic, we would only expect professionals and organizations/firms to be amongst the interested parties in regulatory affairs, because they actively seek information on regulation
* However, recent events and developments have led to an increase in public visibility of regulatory affairs
  + Daylight savings time: Large survey within EU with over 4 million participants (i.e. regulation on time)
  + Dieselgate: Car emissions in cities (i.e. regulation on banning cars in cities)
  + Environmentalism: IPCC Climate reports, Paris agreement, and the ensuing EU efforts to limit climate change (i.e regulation on energy production, industry emissions, and carbon pricing)
* EU regulatory agencies work at the forefront of EU regulatory decision-making and could be expected to be in the stage light of regulatory interest of citizens
  + Depending on their mandate, they conduct targeted research, review existing research, and influence the regulatory agenda of the European decision-making institutions (i.e. Parliament, Council, and Commission)
* Interest in regulatory agencies is a blindspot in the most surveys: The Eurobarometer does not contain one single question on EU agencies
  + This begs the question: **Who cares for regulation?**
  + **How do agencies reply to these demands, what kind of information are they offering to whatever constituency they are catering to?**
* Social media is changing how citizens and public institutions communicate with each other:
  + It offers a public venue for exchange
    - This can go multiple ways: 1. (Hope of many communication experts in the wake of social media use:) A dialogue between citizens and institutions, 2. A one-sided information platform from institutions to citizens, or 3. A one-sided critiquing platform from citizens to institutions
  + In contrast to pre-social media times, agencies now have the chance to probe public opinion and respond to it. Even more directly, they can enter a direct dialogue with citizens and thereby increase visibility and legitimacy of their decisions (although the question is if they are seeking these things).

Literature that I want to speak to (very open to suggestions):

* 1. Responsiveness
  + It is established that institutional independence does not exclude the need for being responsive to a constituency (Selin 2015; Yackee and Yackee 2016; Carpenter 2004). However, it is debated to whom these agencies should be and are responsive to (i.e. politics, media, and/or public)
* 2. Transparency
  + EU agencies have to respond to certain transparency guidelines that the EU has set up. After studying specific agencies like EFSA and EMA it appears that on the outside (presentations and media releases) these agencies stress that they want to be transparent and generally open about what they do.
  + It is not clear how transparent these agencies actually are. Some authors question that EU agencies in particular are transparent to the public but instead focus on being transparent only towards a select group of organizations and institutions to which they have a mutual working relation (Geradin et al. 2005)
* 3. Accountability <- not the focus of this paper, but might be relevant

Data:

This research is based on an extensive dataset collected via the Twitter APIs. Firstly, all Twitter accounts of EU agencies that were officially endorsed by the EU (N = 29) were scraped from the EU website (European Union 2018). Their Twitter handles were used to download the account information of all followers of these agencies (N = XXX, from now on called “follower database”). This account information consists of information such as number of friends and followers, tweets, likes, account description, and name. Furthermore, I downloaded the recent 3200 tweets of each agency, resulting in XXX individual tweets.[[3]](#footnote-3) For each tweet,

Collected last 3200 Tweets of all EU agencies active on Twitter (n=13)

* Collected account information of followers of these agencies
* (tbd) used Twitter firehose to collect tweets directed at the agencies

Hypotheses:

*H1: Regulatory agencies use Twitter as a platform for broadcasting rather than engagement*

*H2: The Twitter audience of Twitter accounts of EU agencies is mainly composed of private citizens with an interest in certain regulation, with smaller numbers of professionals and organizations*

*H3: Agencies mainly rely on each other, because they spread news of each other via retweets within their distinct networks*

Methodology:

* Machine Learning Part I:
  + Code sample of Tweets according to if they are engaging or broadcasting (like Barbera at al. 2015)
  + Use machine learning to classify tweets of the agencies depending on their content
* Machine Learning Part II:
  + Code description (and potentially more information) based on if they belong to a certain citizen or organization group
  + Use machine learning to classify accounts of followers
* Social Network analysis:
  + Detect communities amongst followers
  + Who is at the core of the group of followers (i.e. who follows more than 2 agencies?)

DUMP:

During the last decades, regulatory policymaking in most European countries has been critiqued by academics, journalists, and the public for not representing the best interest of the citizens. Until the 1960s the dominating view has been that regulation is designed to maximize the wellbeing of private citizens (public interest theory). This theory was increasingly questioned (amongst others by eventual Nobel laureates Buchanan, Stigler, Becker, Smith, and Ostrom) and eventually, public choice theory was developed to offer a contrasting view on interest representation in policymaking. Stigler (1971) argues that regulation is not designed and implemented in a vacuum, but is instead created in an environment of competing (public and private) interests. In designing and implementing regulations, the state holds a powerful instrument to either advantage or disadvantage certain groups within society, particularly certain industries. As Stigler argues, the parties that are the target of the regulation tend to be most interested in influencing said regulation. He thereby theorized that it is not the public good that is the main aim of regulation, but “[…] as a rule, regulation is acquired by the industry and is designed and operated primarily for its benefits” (p.3).

1. E.g. ‘*interactieve beleidsvoorbereiding*’ in the Netherlands: A forum in which citizens and local policymakers discuss possible regulations in the early stage of the policymaking process, see Hoogerwerf and Herweijer 2014, Skoric et al. 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. E.g. making them co-designers of policies, see (Evans and Terrey 2016; Fung 2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The free tier Twitter API only allows for the download of the last 3200 tweets. Therefore, depending on the tweeting frequency of each agency, the tweet database is covering varying timeframes. Since the database also contains information about the time that each tweet was posted, I ran the later analyses with time as a control variable, showing that the link between [↑](#footnote-ref-3)