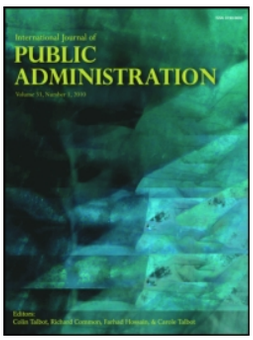

International Journal of Public Administration

ISSN: 0190-0692 (Print) 1532-4265 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/lpad20

Death of Rationality: The Social Networks' Factor in Policy Response to Ebola

Bakry Elmedni

To cite this article: Bakry Elmedni (2016) Death of Rationality: The Social Networks' Factor in Policy Response to Ebola, International Journal of Public Administration, 39:12, 917-926, DOI: 10.1080/01900692.2015.1057851

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2015.1057851

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
2016, VOL. 39, NO. 12, 917–926
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2015.1057851

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Death of Rationality: The Social Networks' Factor in Policy Response to Ebola

Bakry Elmedni

Department of Public Administration, LIU Brooklyn, School of Business, Public Administration and Information Sciences, Brooklyn, New York, United States

ABSTRACT

The sociopolitical role of social networks in public decision-making is far from fully understood. Their fast-pace and elusive nature makes the situation fluid and therefore susceptible to rushed theorization. The emerging dominant view is that social networks increase mass political polarization. A new view proposes that social networks increase harmony and tolerance. By examining the role of social networks in the policy response to Ebola in the United States, this paper suggests that social networks play a dual role: increasing polarization around politically divisive issues and promoting tolerance regarding less contentious issues. The paper also expanded the definition of social networks to include online discussions forums. Using the public choice theory and its rational model as a frame of reference, the study focused on six online forums during the peak of Ebola scare, October 2014 through January 2015.

KEYWORDS

Social networks; public choice; rational model; political polarization

Introduction

The idea of the economic "rational man" who is acting to maximize utility dominated our thinking during most of the twentieth century. March and Simon (1958) challenged the dogma of neoclassic economics, arguing that individuals and organizations do what "satisfice" (pp. 157–159) rather than choosing the best option because of their limited cognitive abilities. Building on March and Simon's notion of bounded rationality, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) developed a prospect theory to address the deficiencies that characterized the rational choice theory. Ultimately, Kahneman (2011) concluded that people and organizations make decisions within a dichotomous mode of thinking: instinctive and emotional versus deliberative and logical. Marwala (2013) introduced the concept of flexibility bounded rationality that can be applied to artificial intelligence, which can be used to increase decision-making capabilities of individuals and organizations. Within this debate lies the question about the influence of social networks on rationality and public decision-making.

If social networks increase mass political polarization, a growing view, then it would be reasonable to suppose that public decisions are less likely to be based on the rational choice model. Put differently, do open channel of public communications facilitated by social networks influence policy response? It appears, as will be discussed later, that individuals seeking to advance their self-interests within public institutions, as presumed by the rational model, stop short from explaining all policy outcomes. For instance, what rational self-interests that can be advanced in apparent defiance of science as in the case of Ebola and anti-vaxxer movement.

Generally, this article seeks to examine the influence of social networks on public decision-making. Particularly, it aims to (1) extend the conceptualization of social networks beyond Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to include online discussion forums and (2) expand the conversation about social networks in two fashions. First, what political polarization—decreased or increased, heightened or lessened by social media—can do to the rational model as a decision-making tool and consequently policy outcome? Second, to explore whether the policy response to Ebola match the public demands, though irrational, as circulated in social networks. This is not to suggest that all public decisions are made based on rational assumptions. Nonetheless, some degree of logical and rational analysis is always deployed to justify the appropriateness of a policy or piece of legislation. It must also be acknowledged early on that comments on social networks cannot be analyzed in isolation of larger societal influences. That is to say that social networks echo what is widely circulated in traditional media outlets like TV, radio, and newspapers.

CONTACT Bakry Elmedni bakry.elmedni@liu.edu LIU Brooklyn, School of Business, Public Administration and Information Sciences, MPA Program, One University Plaza, Brooklyn, NY 11201, USA.

Furthermore, it must be noted that the effects of social networks on politics and policy decisions is far from fully understood let alone to quantify. It is reasonable though to contend that social networks are becoming vital tools for mobilizing public opinions. Claims about terrorists crossing the United States southern borders were widely popularized to undermined President Obama's executive order on immigration. As such, mobilization often takes the form of emotional reactions influenced by the thinking of the moment and the wisdom of the crowd—the very nature of social networks—not necessarily an informed assessment of the situation. The underlying logical explanation, as the rational model tells us, is that the policy outcome is a result of political compromises. What we don't fully understand yet is the role that the social networks play in heightening public emotional plea which may influence policy outcome, sometimes at the expense of what could be a rational choice.

As such, local policy response to Ebola outbreak presented a compelling case to explore this thesis. In dealing with Ebola scare, people's plea (rational or not) to ban flying to and from affected countries left its marks on the public discourse as well as policy response. The article offers insights by analyzing public conversations in online discussion forums regarding Ebola and the policy response of three local governments in New Jersey, New York, and Maine. Let's call this mark the social networks' factor, which manifests through both increased and decreased mass political polarization. A growing body of scholarly work indicates that the introduction of the Internet as a relevant communication tool is contributing to mass political polarization (Farrell, 2012). In analyzing the role of social network, many scholars presented empirical evidence suggesting that Internet and social networks contribute to mass political polarization (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014; Conover, Gonçalves, Flammini, & Menczer, 2012). Contrary to this growing consensus, Barbera (2014) shows that "most social media users are embedded in ideologically diverse networks, and that exposure to political diversity has a positive effect on political moderation" (p. 1). Data analyzed for this article provide a different view about the political role of social networks.

Organizationally, this article is divided into fifth sections. The following section situates the conversation about social networks in a broader theoretical context. Functionally, social networks are extremely effective tools of communications. Effective here means that they can reach large numbers of people in a very short period of time. After building the context, the aim then is to identify possible links between the role of social networks and policy responses to Ebola. The third section explains the methods used to conduct this study. The fourth section presents a discussion on the implications of findings. Finally, the fifth section offers concluding remarks.

Theoretical background and context

Theoretically, the role of social media can be explained through Allison's (1971) governmental politics model. Analyzing the Cuban missile crises, Allison suggested that there are three approaches that one can apply to analyze a major governmental decision: (1) the rational model; (2) the organizational process model; and (3) the governmental politics model. Under the governmental politics model, decisions are group efforts that involve bargaining among players of competing—and sometimes conflicting—interests. Accordingly, social networks can be seen as venues of crowded political opinions that work to form coalitions and alliances and advance interests of certain groups, mainly those who excel in using them to shape public opinions.

It is not entirely clear though whether political polarization sways the populace as well as decision-makers from adopting a rational model to entering ideological realms. What is clear is that politicians, more often than not, use science as a rational platform with the power of persuasion to justify ideological positions. That is to say we are living through eras in which politicized science has become not only commonplace but also a tool for advancing ideological arguments that essentially can go as far as undermining scientific rationality in itself. This can easily be seen in the politics of nutrition, vaccination, and climate change, just to mention a few. Thomas Kuhn (1962) hinted on this dilemma in his groundbreaking work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*.

Kuhn's work came to be more important not only because of his concepts but in the fact that his work changed the way individuals understand the world. Before Kuhn's work, the dominant view of science was characterized by philosophical thoughts about how it should develop. Also, before Kuhn, the view of scientific progress was seen as a great march toward some form of truth, or minimally toward better rational thinking and understanding of the natural world. Kuhn's understanding of how science develops differed dramatically from the dominant view of that time, in which it was believed that there was standard account of steady and cumulative scientific progress. Instead of steady progress, Kuhn presented us with discontinuities—series of alternating normal and

revolutionary stages. The greatest measure of Kuhn's success is the fact that his view of scientific progress seems commonplace today. Kuhn's conceptual work, the paradigm shift mantra, became the foundation for theories about change in almost all disciplines in social sciences.

Nonetheless, one may argue that the biggest disappointment of science for the ideologues is that it rarely offers unchallengeable evidence of its validity for the well-being of mankind. Indeed, there are exceptions where science tends to provide more irrefutable ways of how to better society, but there are so many gray areas. The worst yet, is what to be meticulously studied in the name of science is a political decision, not entirely a scientific one. As a result, we end up in cyclical argumentation about the validity of policy proposals sometimes packaged and sold as science. In the meantime, the polity is left with confusion, suspicion, and skepticism just to name a few. As a result, social cynicism and political disengagement may become a natural response in the face of powerlessness and helplessness in one's ability to change one's political reality. In this context, social networks play an intermediary role in (1) serving as outlets for human sentiments and (2) shaping the public discourse in a way that was never experienced before in such magnitude. A quick glance at public discussion forums and blogs—especially if the topic is ideologically divisive such as climate change, vaccination, or minimum wage—makes the case in a point.

As noted earlier, the emerging dominant view is that social networks increase mass political polarization. Marshal McLuhan's works may offer explanation. In his book *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*, McLuhan (1967) argued that the medium through which the message is communicated leads to subtle social changes that go beyond the immediate content of the message. As such, the relationship between the medium (social networks) and the effect (increased or decreased political polarization) can be more complex than it appears. Notwithstanding this, it is safe to argue that political polarization is a phenomenon that cannot be explained by analyzing social networks in isolation from the broader sociopolitical context. The following subsection briefly reviews theories and approaches to policy decisions and the rational model

Policy decisions and the rational choice

Since policy-making is usually conducted within an organization, be it federal, state, or local government, it might be useful to examine the notion of the rational organization to set the stage for the following points. Fundamentally, rational decision-making can be defined as a process of reaching decisions through logic and information in an optimized fashion (Nozick, 1993; Spohn, 2002). Organizations "are expected to produce results, their actions are expected to be reasonable, or rational" (Thompson, 1967, p. 1). To Thompson, organizations by design strive to operate under rational norms, but rationality is limited by uncertainty. Many studies have been conducted on organizational design and rationality to respond to ever-growing uncertainty since Thompson's writing. Questioning the rational assumptions in organizational decision-making took an intellectual life of its own.

The most influential of these studies is the earlier work by March and Simon (1958), in which they questioned the ability of individuals and organizations (acting like a "rational man" (pp. 157–182) as was conceived in neoclassic economics) to maximize utility by considering all available options and choosing the best. March and Simon suggested that instead of looking for the best option (maximizing), individuals and organizations aim mainly for satisfaction by choosing the option that is good enough. The idea of "bounded rationality" then became the foundation of works that helped Herbert Simon to win the Noble Prize in 1978. The concept of bounded rationality not only accepted as an alternative method for decision-making for both individual and organizational, but also became the backbone for a great deal of research (Putnam & Mumby, 1993; (Reed, 2007(). However, many scholarly voices continued to suggest that the fact that people have limited abilities does not mean that they stop seeking to be rational in their actions. As such, at a normative level, rationality in terms of utility maximization is what guides people search for optimization. Freeman (1999) explained that:

> The economics of organizations revolve around two basic ideas: that human behavior is fundamentally rational, in the sense that people seek to maximize utilities as they go about their organizational business, and that organizations are set up the way they are because it is more efficient to organize that way (p. 164)

It is important to note that although the bounded rationality thesis had a revolutionary influence by questioning the assumptions of utility maximization and market efficiency, it has not replaced the theory of rationality. What bounded rationality has done was to show the limitations and applicability of rationality in the real world. That is to say that data used to make rational decisions is incomplete and susceptible to

measurement errors; thus it is imperfect. Yet, even if the data is complete and accurate, making sense of it remains a real challenge. This is where social networks come into play. Social networks provide unlimited space and access to disputed facts and contested realities. These are the same realities that will be used to inform public decision-making.

More recent studies expanded on the concept of bounded rationality as a reality of organizational decision-making. Building on the concept of bounded rationality, Marwala (2013) proposed a theory of flexibility-bounded rationality to respond to the technological advances which made information readily available because "modern technology now allows us to update the limiting concept of bounded rationality to a less limited concept of flexibly-bounded rationality" (p. 5).

In terms of application, theory of rational choice then became the vehicle through which maximization of utility, i.e., rational decisions, were sought after and pursued. Rational choice theory suggests that that people choose a certain option based on its purported potential outcome and impact coupled with its probability of occurrence (Allingham, 2002). However, the theory of rational choice failed to take into account the relative relation between the individual's status before and after the decision being made. In other words, the impact of a decision can only be known after the implementation. To deal with this challenge, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) introduced the prospect theory which added the reference position while evaluating the optimal decision that sought to maximize utility. Kahneman (2011) elaborated on the dichotomy between two modes of thinking: (1) fast, instinctive, and emotional and (2) slower, more deliberative, and more logical. Discussing cognitive biases embedded in each type of thinking, he ultimately argued that people place too much confidence in human judgment

Theoretically, the utilitarian principle—the greater good for the greatest majority—has been one of the guiding principles for a rational public choice. It is hard to argue that this is the case if one looks at the types of policies being made at both national and local levels. There are other theories that also seek to explain the public decision-making, some put more emphasis on explaining the dynamics of the process such as game theory. Others focus on the coalition building as a primary tool for getting things done in a government (Allison, 1971). Public choice theory is probably the most used tool for explaining why certain public decisions are made instead of other options.

Public choice can be thought of as an application of the rational choice model to non-market decision-making (Hill, 1999). Generally speaking, it was deployed as a method for applying economics to political behavior, mainly public decision-making. James Buchanan defined public choice as "politics without romance" (as cited in Shughart II, p. 1). Buchanan and Tullock (1962) have argued that public choice involves the science of exchanges. In this view, a combination of economic assumptions and collective action. Under this combination, individuals seeking to further their own self-interest, as in individual decision-making, use the political process—which is meant to be a collective action—to advance their self-interests (Buchanan, 1968). The model was meant to analyze the process not the results; therefore, it holds no judgment about the appropriateness of choices that were to be made under non-market institutions.

Furthermore, the model views individuals in the political process as seeking utility maximization. The political process, however, is characterized by various institutional constraints. The model makes no distinction between the motives of an individuals' behavior in the market place versus their behavior in the political arena. The question then becomes if we can apply the same neoclassical economic standards of traditional price theory to evaluate public decisions. Or put differently, do equilibriums exist in non-market contexts? Are they Pareto efficient? That is to ask: is the public decision going to create a situation in which resources are distributed such that it is impossible to make one individual better off without making at least one person worse off?

The dichotomy between self-interests and collective action can be traced back to Machiavelli (1469–1527) and Hobbes (1588–1679). However, modern public choice era is generally believed to have begun with the work of Duncan Black (1958), who pioneered the use of economics to explain voting procedures and group decision-making. Commenting on the dichotomy between self-interest and common good, Shughart II (2014), a leading contemporary public choice theorist, writes:

> The wishful thinking…presumes that participants in the political sphere aspire to promote the common good. In the conventional "public interest" view, public officials are portrayed as benevolent "public servants" who faithfully carry out the "will of the people." In tending to the public's business, voters, politicians, and policymakers are supposed somehow to rise above their own parochial concerns. (p. 1)

Another theory to explain public decision is what is now known as game theory, a branch of applied mathematics. Basically, game theory aims to mathematically capture the behavior in strategic situations, in which a

person's success in making desired choices depends on the choices of others (Pavel, 2012). In the realm of public policies, game theory suggests that a certain public choice will benefit specific groups at the expense of other groups because one group's gain is another group's loss. This is what is referred as zero-sum game. The premise is that all players are rational in pursuing utility maximization and in choosing their tactical moves.

Another version of rational model is cost–benefit techniques. Comparing the value of benefits against costs by using mathematical formula is the foundation of this method. Cost-effective model is a variation of cost–benefit analysis, which aims to justify, explain, and rationalize public choices. While game theory seeks to explain the actions of rational players and the responses required for every action, the public choice presupposes that conflict of interests among all the players in the polity does not necessarily produce the choices that maximize the common good of the group.

All these methods have informed public decision-making in theory and practice. The theoretical ideals of public decisions have always been about the greatest good for the greatest majority. Yet, what one sees in all these approaches is a sort of rational underpinnings. This is, of course, before modern public spheres—the media, Internet, and social networks—became very effective vehicles for transmitting feelings and sentiments. This is not to suggest that feelings were not part of public spheres, but to point out that not in such a profound way that comes in forms of instantaneous polling in the cyber world facilitated by social networks' *likes, buzzes*, and *trending*. With these effects, the public reaction to Ebola has found its way into the policy responses. The unjustified fear—not supported by scientific evidence—of Ebola was transformed from normal human reactions to the unknown into political pressures that informed a policy response at the expense of rational choices in some occasions. This is a result of politicizing a moment of fear through media in general and social networks in particular.

Methodology

This is an exploratory study with a relatively small sample. It applies qualitative methods to code and analyze comments about Ebola scare posted on public discussion forums during the period of October 2014 through January 2015. The decision to use qualitative techniques is based on the fact that quantifying public conversations can, at best, tell us aggregate and trends without offering in-depth understanding of the internal logic and dynamism that govern the creation and evolvement of public discourse around the issue.

The sample comprises eight threads of public discussion forums on six webpages: Facebook, the Huffington Post, the Washington Post, the Atlantic, Politico, and Salon. Since all comments usually follow a story or statement, the analysis was not concerned with the opinion or facts discussed in the body of the statement and journalistic piece. Rather, it focused entirely on statements posted as personal comments in commentary sections. It might be useful to note that all of these forums are linked to Facebook not only through readership and private posting but also through comment transferability. One may comment on an article posted by a friend while reading it on Facebook and the same comment will then appear in the commentary section beneath the original piece. As pointed out earlier, all the selected forums are referred to here as social networks because functionally they all work as open spaces for public engagement. Analyzing comments from these forums not only aligns with the expansion of the meaning of social networks, but also makes the case for online discussion forums as useful venues rich with data to study ongoing trends in public opinions. In some occasions, a comment becomes bigger than the original story and takes life on its own right. Generally, when people talk about social networks, we think of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Private blogs, online newspapers, and commentary sections are rarely included in this conceptualization of social networks even though they provide access and opportunity to engage in public conversations. The major difference between online public forums and Facebook is that they are not built around the notion of privacy, friendship, and acquaintance. Some of the online forums allow people to comment anonymously, which arguably can be liberating for people to express their true feelings and opinions.

Content analysis is used to analyze, code, and organize individuals' commentary statements by categories. In this case, comments responding to Ebola scare include public fear and policy response at the national and local levels. Then, comments were arranged in three categories: rational, irrational, and irrelevant. Let's call this three-pronged analytical model the rationality-spectrum framework. The criterion used to determine whether a comment is rational or not is based on whether there is credible scientific evidence to back it up. For instance, if someone made a comment such that "there is no link between lung cancer and smoking"—this comment will be deemed irrational because there is ample, strong scientific evidence that suggests otherwise. The category for irrelevant statements is needed to

Table 1. Public Discussion Forums.

Forms	Observed comments	Analyzed comments
Politico	3403	403
Salon	61	61
Huffington post	967	67
Huffington post	7	7
The Atlantic	293	93
The Washington post	26	26
Huffington Post	4	4
Facebook	256	150
	5017	811

include comments that did not speak to the subject matter. By now, it is common knowledge that people tend to digress from the main issue easily when participating in online forums, probably more than in face-to-face conversations. At least, in-person conversation allows for redirecting, refocusing, and clarifying. When talking, online people choose more selectively the part of the conversation they want to comment on.

During the observation period, these eight forums registered 5017 comments, of which only 811 comments were coded, analyzed, and categorized based on the rationality-spectrum framework. It must be noted here that having 5017 comments does not mean that 5017 individuals participated in the thread. This is due to the fact that some people may have commented multiple times. Also, the author could not confirm whether some of the participants used more than one screen name to post multiple comments in the same thread or the other analyzed public forums. However, all the 811 comments came from different screen names, which means that no participant was counted twice unless they used a different name to post new comments. Moreover, in certain incidences, the analysis included all posted comments on a forum while in others only some comments were analyzed. The decision of what comments should be included was based entirely on the time of posting. For instance, of the 3403 comments on Politico, the analysis only covered the first 403 comments. Table 1 shows the distribution of observed statements versus analyzed ones, and more details about the forums (title of story, web links, and date of posting) are available in Appendix 1.

Discussion of findings

Before placing each statement on the rationality-spectrum framework, participants' comments initially represented reactions to the opinion or facts presented in a statement (Facebook) or story (online newspapers), where a person develop arguments that were said to be objective and factual. Comments either agree with the central thesis of the story or oppose it. Within the spectrum of agree and oppose, there exist endorsement and skepticism. Some comments are more nuanced and cannot be easily labeled as agree or disagree, especially that the topic under discussion is complex and multi-layered. Table 2 shows the placement of statements in the rationality-spectrum framework.

Table 2. Comments Placement Along the Rationality-Spectrum Framework.

Forms	*R*	%	IR	%	IRR	%	Total
Politico	164	40.69	200	49.63	39	9.68	403
Salon	28	45.90	20	32.79	13	21.31	61
Huffington post	35	52.23	20	29.86	12	17.91	67
Huffington post	4	57.14	1	14.29	2	28.57	7
The Atlantic	65	69.89	20	21.50	8	8.60	93
The Washington post	16	61.53	8	30.77	2	7.69	26
Huffington post	3	75.00	0	00.00	1	25.00	4
Facebook	15	10.00	130	86.67	5	3.33	150
Total	330	40.69	399	49.20	82	10.11	811

In the framework, *R* represents rational, IR represents irrational, and IRR represents irrelevant.

What constitutes rationality in responding to Ebola? The standard procedures and data released by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), which was also profoundly augmented by the medical community, were used to determine what is rational. An example would be that people who came in contact with Ebola patients should not be deemed contagious if they exhibited no symptoms because they are not contagious even if they were in incubation period. To suggest otherwise would be irrational. This is not to suggest that procedural mishaps did not occur, but rather to make the point that mishaps by the CDC should not render a policy based on scientific evidence as completely erroneous. Another point that also needs to be considered is that some public forums might have preconceived image regarding their political affiliation. That is to say, the readers of the Huffington Post are likely perceived to be educated, liberal-leaning, and more open to different opinions compared to those who follow conservative outlets. Whether the notion of such labeling is accurate might be difficult to prove; however what matters is that such perception might be at play when people choose to visit a certain webpage and write comments. Another interesting observation is about Facebook's threads, where the percentage of irrational comments (at 86.67) is the highest compared to the other public forms (the second highest at 49.63). One possible explanation lies in the reality that these comments came from likeminded people, who are either friends, colleagues, acquaintance, or friends of friends. As such, one may deduce that unlike other social networks, Facebook promotes agreeability and conformity, not necessarily tolerance as contended by some scholars.

Now, one may wonder what connections exist between online late night rambling and public decision-making.

Or put differently, could the type of public choices being made be nothing more than a reflection of the contentions that exist in the polity? One irrational participant put it this way:

> The difference between the appeal of Bill Clinton and the ever shrinking popularity of Obama can be clearly seen with the Ebola crisis. When 2/3 of the American public wants a travel ban, YOU GIVE THEM A DAMN TRAVEL BAN. Even if it will have no effect at all on slowing Ebola, you do it for purely political reasons.

The challenge has always been, and will be, is rationality in whose perspective as the analysis shows. Political immediacy suggests that rational elected officials should do what people want. That is why public opinion polling is sometimes seen as if it is a new election or a vote of confidence or condemnation. Nonetheless, there, at least, are three concerns regarding popular opinions: (1) they are not stagnant, (2) they are difficult to measure, and (3) they do not always suggest the best course of action. But more importantly is that representative democracy is a system of approximation not optimality. One could wonder if Emancipation Proclamation would have passed if it was put to a popular vote. As such, following political immediacy, a travel ban was a rational choice for elected officials who wanted to be popular. Following the rationality of scientific evidence, a travel ban would do nothing more than provide a delusional psychological relief. A rational participant captured these nuances:

> All this silly Ebola hysteria does is show how unsophisticated and ignorant of science baby-boomers are. There is no serious threat of Ebola spreading here, and no need for a ban, which would hurt our ability to fight Ebola here and in Africa, where it is critical we get it under control. 50,000 Americans die of mostly Asian flus ever year which are easier to spread than Ebola. The flu vaccine we all try to get covers only a few strains, leaving us 100% vulnerable to many others. Flus will kill 10,000 times more Americans than Ebola ever will. Yet there are no travel bans for Asia. When SARS came to American under Bush, no travel ban. And we stopped it. As we will with Ebola. This is simply another case of Americans acting stupid. It happens with sad regularity: look at the two elections for Dubya and the belief of 65% of Americans that Saddam was behind 9/11. What American think and believe is sometimes flat-out stupid and hysterical. This is one.

To give a complete picture of the rationality-spectrum framework, here is an excellent example that falls in the irrelevant category:

> Maybe someone on this thread can help me. 600,000 Americans die per annum from heart disease. But consider this: My great-aunt died recently. Cause of death: heart failure. Age: 107. Yes, her heart stopped beating, because it was worn out. My mother died at home, alone. Cause of death was listed on her death certificate as heart failure. No autopsy. She could have had an aneurysm or undiagnosed cancer. Is heart failure listed when people just die of old age?

The context of this comment is a story discussing the media's political panic. The author of the article argued that the hysteric public reaction is a symptom of narcissism, which is directing the attention away from the real story; the suffering of people in West Africa. Of course, within the realm of irrelevant lies a rainbow of all kind of comments: the provocatively silly, the vindictive, the reductionist, the outright bizarre, and on and on. There is no need to provide more samples of the three categories, for there is no factual value to be added by numbers. This is to say that 100 or 200 samples of rational comments will still tell the same story.

Now if we turn to the public decisions that were made to respond to the public hysteria, one may safely argue that they would have been based on pure scientific evidence before anything else. Or at least that what one would have hoped for—to have some public leaders who are calm and collected in the face of social storms and catastrophic events. Unfortunately, that was not the case, writes Cary Gibson (2014) because,

> The actions of some state officials would lead one to believe that we need to prepare ourselves for a dangerous pandemic. New York and New Jersey have both implemented mandatory 21-day quarantines for health care professionals returning from volunteer work with Ebola patients in West Africa. In the state of Maine, returning nursing volunteer Kaci Hickox recently battled with state officials over their insistence that she remain quarantined, even though she is not exhibiting Ebola symptoms. The state monitored her movements and even had a police car tail her on a recent bike ride. In Louisiana, attendees of an upcoming infectious diseases conference were told not to come if they've recently been exposed to Ebola patients. (pp. 1–2)

What we have seen with Ebola was that fear and hysteria became the guiding rationality for some state governments. To be accurate, however, the Obama Administration stayed the course of rational scientific evidence. As such, some of the local governments' actions could be seen as a mere response to public fear dramatized by political motives. The public fear was heightened by various media outlets, including social networks. It is certainly difficult to quantify the role of social networks in comparison to other venues. But what seems to be clearer now is that social networks do not cause mass political polarization as suggested by some scholars nor are they responsible for political harmony as suggested by another. Both

perspectives have their line of reasoning. Those who argue that social networks increase political polarization (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Colleoni et al., 2014; Conover et al., 2012) consider them places where people confront each other with their predetermined political position; the result of such collision is both sides leave the room with more conviction in their prior beliefs. Barbera (2014), who suggested that they actually decrease political polarization, presumes that social networks bring people from different political backgrounds and because people are likely to respect their friends, colleagues, acquaintances, then everybody would be elevated to a higher degree of tolerance. The major concern with this proposition is how often people befriend others who have dissimilar values and worldviews. This is evident in the similarity of comments from threads on Facebook as noted earlier. To be exact, these threads came from the webpage of educated and informed people, who still failed to be rational. The point is that the social networks are part of a larger social system and whatever is happening in that system will be reflected in them. This is to say in times of mass political polarization regarding certain topics in the larger system, social networks indeed play a part in adding fuel to the fire. In times of crisis, social networks will spread the spirit of solidarity. The incidence of Charlie Hebdo in Paris was a quintessential tragic example of that sense of solidarity, conformity, and agreeability, simply because the topic does not involve deep controversy at least in Western societies.

At this point, it would be safe to argue that social networks played a role in swaying public decisions away from the rational choice. That was evident in the policy responses to Ebola in New Jersey, New York, and Maine. Commenting on how the state's response was not only irrational but problematic, David Francis (2014) wrote:

> The fight over how to respond to Ebola cases on American soil became a battle between states' right and civil liberties when a state judge ruled that the rights of a medical worker exposed to the disease trumped Maine's order to quarantine her. (p. 1)

Elaborating further on the irrationality of policy choices enacted by many states, Gibson (2014) described the measures as

> Unnecessary and an overreaction to the presence of Ebola in the United States. They also have the potential to create further harm by contributing to the culture of fear that has pervaded the country since the first Ebola patient came in … Enacting policies that are not in line with what we know about Ebola or how it is spread reinforces misinformation and contributes to the anxiety of the general population… The state quarantine policies are an overreach and not in the best interests of public health. (pp. 1–2)

Best interest or not, the local governments' response to Ebola might be one of the signs for the beginning of the death of rationality in public decision-making. But we still need to keep in mind that public choice theory has long suggested that rationality in public policies is not necessarily about maximizing the common good such as best interest of public health. The problem is not public leadership, argued Shughart II (2014), because "changing the identities of the people who hold public office will not produce major changes in policy outcomes. Electing better people will not, by itself, lead to much better government" (p. 1). Therefore, the practical start is to accept "the assumption that all individuals, be they voters, politicians, or bureaucrats, are motivated more by self-interest than by public interest" (Shughart II, 2014, p. 1). The rational choice directs our attention to the institutional dynamics and processes under which people pursue their own objectives. The institutional dynamics can only advance the agenda of the powerful interest groups and economic elite as concluded by Gilens and Page (2014) in their study of thousands policy proposals. As such, social networks influence the dynamics of competing societal interests by being part of the riches' campaign for shaping public opinions.

Concluding remarks

The analytic framework applied in this article to analyze the policy outcome put in place as a response to Ebola can also be used to explain the political stalemate characterizing other policy areas such as climate change, immigration reforms, and tax reforms. But the model probably can more readily explain the anti-vaxxer movement that came under public scrutiny in the wake of the renewable measles outbreak.

The public outrage during the Ebola scare can probably be explained by factors other than mass political polarization intensified by social networks and the media. Among these factors is the tension between the local and the national, which characterized the history of the United States. We have seen how quickly unjustified fear was transformed into public outrage directed toward the federal government. As such, taking positions that are clearly irrational and unscientific are justified through the political logic. Within such environment, social networks can play an effective role in increasing the already existing political polarization and therefore swaying public decisions away from the rational model. This can come in the form of action as in the case of policy response to Ebola or

inaction as in the situation of climate change and tax reforms. Both action and inaction are forms of public choices that not necessarily serve particular public interests. What is more important is that the influence of social networks is topic specific. If the issue is divisive, then social networks are likely to increase political polarization while if the issue is less contentious social networks may contribute to increasing harmony and acceptance.

References

Adamic, L., & Glance, N. (2005). The political blogosphere and the 2004US election: Divided they blog. In *Proceedings of the third international workshop on Link discovery* (pp. 36–43). New York, NY: ACM.

Allingham, M. (2002). *Choice theory: A very short introduction*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Allison, G. (1971). *Essence of decision: Explaining the Cuban missile crisis* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Longman.

Barbera, P. (2014). *How social media reduces mass political polarization. Evidence from Germany, Spain, and the U.S.* Retrieved from https://files.nyu.edu/pba220/public/barbera-polarization-social-media.pdf

Black, D. (1958). *The theory of committees and elections*. Boston, MA: Kluwer.

Buchanan, J. (1968). *The demand and supply of public goods*. Chicago, IL: Rand McNally.

Buchanan, J., & Tullock, G. (1962). *The calculus of consent: Logical foundations of constitutional democracy*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Colleoni, E., Rozza, A., & Arvidsson, A. (2014). Echo chamber or public sphere? Predicting political orientation and measuring political homophily in twitter using big data. *Journal of Communication*, *64* (2), 317–332. doi:10.1111/jcom.2014.64.issue-2

Conover, M., Gonçalves, B., Flammini, F., & Menczer, F. (2012). Partisan asymmetries in online political activity. *EPJ Data Science*, *1* (1), 1–19. doi:10.1140/epjds6

Farrell, H. (2012). The consequences of the internet for politics. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *15*, 35–52. doi:10.1146/annurev-polisci-030810-110815

Francis, D. (2014). *Ebola response becomes states' Rights vs. Civil liberties*. Retrieved from http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/10/31/ebola_response_becomes_states_rights_vs_civil_liberties_maine_quarantine

Freeman, J. (1999). Efficiency and rationality in organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *44*, 163–1975. doi:10.2307/2667036

Gibson, C. (2014). *Facts, Not Fear: Misguided quarantine policies have the potential to cause more damage than the Ebola virus itself*. Retrieved February 10, 2015 from http://www.usnews.com/opinion/blogs/opinion-blog/2014/10/31/cuomo-and-christie-responses-to-ebola-are-over-the-top

Gilens, M., & Page, B. I. (2014). Testing theories of American politics: Elites, interest groups, and average Citizens. *Perspectives on Politics*, *12* (3), 564–581. doi:10.1017/S1537592714001595

Hill, P. J. (1999). Public choice: A review. *Faith & Economics*, *34*, 1–10.

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow Macmillan*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Reprint edition.

Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1979). Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk. *Econometrica*, *47*, 263–291. doi:10.2307/1914185

Kuhn, T. (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

March, J. G., & Simon, H. A. (1958). *Organizations*. Boston, MA: Wiley Martin.

Marwala, T. (2013). Flexibly-bounded Rationality and Marginalization of Irrationality Theories for Decision Making. arXiv:1306.20 [cs.AI]. Retrieved from http://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/1306/1306.2025.pdf

McLuhan, M., & Fiore, Q. (1967). *The Medium is The Message: An Inventory of Effects*. London, UK: Penguin Books.

Nozick, R. (1993). *The nature of rationality*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Pavel, L. (2012). *Game theory for control of optimal networks, static and dynamic game theory: Foundation and application* (pp. 11–26). doi:10.1007/978-0-8176-8322-1_2

Putnam, L. L., & Mumby, D. K. (1993). Organizations, emotion and the myth of rationality. In S. Fineman, (Ed.), *Emotion in organization* (pp. 36–57). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Reed, M. (2007). Organizations and rationality: The odd couple. *Journal of Management Studies*. doi:10.1111/j.1467-6486.1991.tb00768.x

Shughart II, W. F. (2014). *The concise encyclopedia of economics: Public choice*. Retrieved from http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/PublicChoice.html

Spohn, W. (2002). The many facets of the theory of rationality. *Croatian Journal of Philosophy*, *l* (2), 247–262.

Thompson, J. (1967). *Organizations in action: Social bases of administrative theory*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Appendix 1 Threads Analyzed during September 2014 through January 2015.

Forums	Title and link	Date posted	Collected comments	Analyzed comments
Politico	POLITICO poll: Democrats in danger over Ebola www.politico.com/story/2014/10/politico-poll-ebola-democrats-112017.html	10/20/2014	3,403	403
Salon	Ebola, the "heart of darkness" and the epidemic of fear. It is a dangerous virus and Africa is suffering. But the American media-political panic is ugly and narcissistic http://www.salon.com/2014/10/04/ebola_the_heart_of_darkness_and_the_epidemic_of_fear/	10/04/2014	61	61
Huffington post	Gut-wrenching images show the brutal reality of the Ebola outbreak in Liberia http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/10/ebola-photos_n_5967682.html	10/10/14	967	67
Huffington post	The heroes and zeroes Of America's brief Ebola outbreak http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/11/20/ebola-united-states-heroes_n_6195348.html	11/21/2014	7	7
The Atlantic	21 days: An expert in biological warfare warns against complacency in public measures against Ebola. http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/10/21-days/381901/	10/26/2014	293	93
The Washington post	Ebola is the 2014 election's October surprise http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/10/15/ebola-is-the-2014-elections-october-surprise/	10/15/2014	26	26
Huffington post	Ebola: How quickly we forget http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kwei-quartey/2014-ebola_b_6404186.html	1/10/2015	4	4
Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=11320963&fref=ts	9/30/2015	256 5017	150 811