



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



In what ways is social media transforming the policymaking process?

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International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2026, 18(03), 1446-1452

Publication history: Received on 18 February 2026; revised on 24 March 2026; accepted on 27 March 2026

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/ijrsra.2026.18.3.0613>

Abstract

Social media is profoundly transforming the traditionally closed and hierarchical policymaking process by introducing interactivity, openness, and real-time responsiveness, thereby enhancing public governance effectiveness. This paper analyzes its transformative role across three key stages: agenda setting, policy implementation, and policy evaluation. Overall, social media restructures information flows and reconfigures relationships among policy actors, increasing the agility, inclusivity, and responsiveness of the policymaking process.

Keywords: Social media; Policymaking process; Agenda setting; Policy implementation; Policy evaluation

1. Introduction

The proliferation of social media has fundamentally altered the landscape of public communication, creating new channels for information dissemination, public engagement, and political participation. Platforms such as Twitter, Rednote, and TikTok have become not only spaces for social interaction but also arenas where public issues are debated, collective action is mobilised, and policy demands are articulated. This transformation has important implications for the policymaking process—a complex sequence of stages through which public problems are identified, addressed, and evaluated. While traditional policymaking has long been shaped by formal institutions, interest groups, and mainstream media, the rise of social media introduces new actors, faster feedback mechanisms, and unprecedented levels of public visibility.

Despite growing scholarly interest in the relationship between digital technologies and governance, there remains a need for systematic analysis of how social media specifically transforms the different stages of the policymaking process. Existing research has often focused on isolated stages or has treated social media primarily as a communication tool rather than a structural force reshaping policy dynamics. This paper addresses this gap by asking: In what ways is social media transforming the policymaking process?

To answer this question, the paper examines three representative stages of the policymaking process: agenda setting, policy implementation, and policy evaluation. It draws on three distinct policy fields—criminal justice, higher education governance, and health policy—to illustrate how social media operates across different contexts. The paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media is reshaping policymaking in the digital era.

2. Definition

It is necessary to define the concepts of social media and the policymaking process before examining the ways in which social media transforms the policymaking process.

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2.1. Social media

Social media is broadly perceived as a two-way communication channel for feedback and interaction [1]; it is also refined to an unrestricted, enduring, Internet-based platform for personal communication on a vast scale [2]. It not only facilitates interaction between users but also allows for the production of user-based content from which value can be derived [2]. The paper argued that social media not only functions as a medium of information dissemination in a general sense but also plays a role in the policymaking process. Social media is characterised by real-time interaction and responsiveness [1], and in the area of public policy, the creative and open-ended nature of social media is an important advantage by summarising scholars' research on social media [3].

2.2. The policymaking process

The policymaking process refers to the different stages that a public policy goes through from its beginning to its end [4, 5]. It is comprised of five stages: agenda setting, policy formulation, decision-making, policy implementation, and policy evaluation [6]. The paper posits that the transformation of the policymaking process by social media primarily manifests in the alteration of its five stages. Therefore, it will choose agenda setting and policy evaluation as the representative stages and analyse how social media has brought about the transformation.

3. The Transformation of Agenda-Setting in the Policymaking Process by Social Media

This section will analyse social media transform the policymaking process in the agenda setting stage through information networking technology and its language and framing, concerning the issues of sexual crime in the area of criminal justice policy. The analysis in this section will be combined with the case of the #MeToo movement and agenda-setting theory.

Agenda setting is the beginning of the policymaking process, in which policy actors identify social problems and propose solutions [6]. It is often thought of as a function of traditional media, but in recent years the development of social media has also had an important impact on it. The paper considers the #MeToo movement as a typical example of social media influencing agenda setting. #MeToo is a global movement aimed at exposing crimes such as sexual abuse and harassment, advocating for the reform and improvement of laws and policies. Initially, MeToo was a phrase created by Tarana Burke in 2006 to aid women who had experienced sexual violence [7]. Actress Ashley Judd leveled accusations of sexual harassment against media tycoon Harvey Weinstein on October 5, 2017. Ten days later, actress Alyssa Milano called on Twitter for the usage of the "Me Too" hashtag, encouraging women to share their stories in order to collectively fight against sexual crime [7]. The movement gained extensive dissemination on social media, attracting a lot of attention and gradually spreading globally. People from different countries used the #MeToo hashtag in various languages, generating massive global responses and discussions. Using social media platforms such as Twitter, the #MeToo movement successfully put sexual crime issues into the global policy agenda, and to some extent, prompted the reform of laws and policies related to sexual crime issues.

Agenda-setting theory posits that news media plays a central role in shaping public agendas, possessing the capacity to affect the salience of various topics on the public agenda [8]. The first level of agenda-setting is Object Agenda-Setting, where media coverage influences the formation of public agendas [9]. Later, the second level of agenda-setting, known as Attribute Agenda-Setting, was introduced, suggesting that media can affect public perception of the salience of issue attributes [10]. The media environment has changed dramatically as a result of the rise of social media. The function of social media in agenda-setting has aroused academic debate. Some studies doubted the validity of the traditional agenda-setting theory [11]. Some researchers, however, have argued that social media has not fundamentally altered agenda-setting theory, but rather created a new channel for it [12]. The Network Agenda Setting Model, which was presented, asserts that the network relationships' salience among objects and/or attributes is affected by media [13]. The perspectives shown above are based on studies in the fields of journalism and communication. But it is of importance to incorporate an agenda-setting perspective of public policy in order to explain issues in this field.

The paper argues that social media has transformed the unidirectional nature of agenda-setting flow, which in turn has influenced public and media agenda-setting, and ultimately policy agenda-setting. We can utilize the case of the #MeToo movement to analyze the ways in which social media transforms the policymaking process. Specifically, it reveals how social media has transformed the agenda setting stage related to sexual crime issues within the realm of criminal justice policy.

Firstly, social media has influenced and amplified the public agenda on the issue of sexual crime through information networking technology, which in turn has driven the policy agenda. The timely and rapid nature of social media has made it responsive to the #MeToo movement, setting up agendas for public discussion promptly [1]. According to a Pew

Research Centre survey, social media is a key means for Americans to obtain news; in particular, 70% of Twitter users claim they use Twitter to keep up with news that is happening [14]. The development of information networking technology has made social media a platform for timely communication, allowing users to express their opinions and participate in discussions on social issues at any time. Data from the Pew Research Center suggests that the usage of the #MeToo hashtag on Twitter surpassed 19 million instances between October 5, 2017, and September 30, 2018, which means the hashtag is widely used [15]. Furthermore, social media has enabled the transition from a one-way to a two-way communication model. It has helped to expand the appeal of agenda-setting on sexual crime issues by breaking down geographical boundaries and considerably facilitating the flow of information around the world. It was clear that social media platforms such as Twitter had drawn public attention during the #MeToo movement, contributing to the expanding influence of the public agenda on sexual crime issues. Public opinion in this process exerted pressure on the government, invoking its attention, which in turn influenced the construction and development of policy agenda-setting.

Secondly, social media has contributed to improvements in the way the mainstream media constructs the issue of sexual crime in media agenda-setting through its language and framing, which then drives policy agenda-setting. The framing and language of media agenda-setting would influence public opinion about sexual crime, which in turn influences policy making [16]. A qualitative analysis of the coverage of sex crimes in the Washington Post and the New York Times pointed out that mainstream media coverage had several shortcomings that were detrimental to the promotion of agenda-setting, such as coverage that was euphemistic and stereotypical in its description of sex crimes [16]. And there were also stories that expressed scepticism towards survivors but were filled with bias and sympathy for the perpetrators [16]. However, the situation has changed with the rise of the #MeToo movement on social media. The real-time, interactive discussions on social media have contributed to a greater public reflection on sexual crime issues and the importance of reforming public policy. The language and framing of social media have improved traditional media agenda-setting, triggering a shift in mainstream media coverage. This shift reflects the public's significant concern over sexual crime, which has prompted the government to take notice of the public's demands and thus affect policy agenda-setting.

4. The Transformation of Policy Implementation in the Policymaking Process by Social Media

This section analyses how social media transforms the policy implementation stage in the policymaking process, drawing on issues of internal governance in the field of higher education management. Policy implementation refers to the process of translating policy goals into concrete actions, involving the allocation of policy resources, the actions of implementing actors, and the responses of target groups [6]. Traditional policy implementation often follows a hierarchical transmission model, where information is prone to distortion and delay as it travels from the top down, while feedback on implementation effectiveness must pass through lengthy channels before returning to decision-makers. Traditional policy implementation faces three main dilemmas: first, hierarchical information loss, whereby policy instructions pass through multiple layers from decision-makers to the frontline, with each layer potentially causing attenuation or misinterpretation; second, prolonged feedback loops, whereby implementation outcomes and the needs of policy targets must be reported upward level by level, making it difficult for decision-makers to grasp the real situation in a timely manner; third, the unidirectional nature of implementation, whereby policy implementation is viewed as a top-down directive, lacking interaction and adaptation with policy targets. The emergence of social media offers new possibilities for addressing these dilemmas.

This paper argues that social media transforms the unidirectional nature and lag of traditional policy implementation by reshaping feedback mechanisms and interaction paradigms in policy implementation, shifting it from a "top-down directive" model to a "two-way interactive and dynamic adaptation" model. The case of "governance via social media" in Chinese higher education institutions can be used to analyse the specific ways in which social media transforms the policy implementation stage.

First, social media shortens the feedback loop in policy implementation. In traditional policy implementation, the demands of policy targets (such as university faculty and students) must pass through multiple levels of transmission—from individuals to grassroots organisations, to functional departments, and finally to decision-makers. Each level of transmission may introduce delays and distortions due to information filtering, differences in perspective, or procedural complexities. This long-chain feedback mechanism makes it difficult for decision-makers to accurately and promptly grasp the true effectiveness of policy implementation, nor can they make timely corrections to deviations occurring during implementation.

Social media significantly shortens this feedback loop through its immediacy and openness. Taking the example of Zhang Donggang, Party Secretary of Renmin University of China, who opened a Rednote account, issues raised by students in the comment section—ranging from fruit supply in the Tongzhou campus canteen to doctoral student stipends and

shuttle bus schedules—received responses and resolutions in a short period of time. When a student noted the absence of fruit in the canteen, pre-cut fruit was available the following day. This model of "immediate response and prompt resolution" compressed the feedback and problem-resolution process, which would otherwise have taken weeks or even months, into mere hours or days.

For policy implementation, this means that the evaluation of implementation effectiveness no longer relies solely on written reports submitted through hierarchical channels, but can be obtained directly from the real-time feedback of policy targets. This change enables problems arising during policy implementation to be identified and addressed more quickly, thereby enhancing the efficiency and precision of policy implementation.

Second, social media reduces information costs in policy implementation. In traditional policy implementation models, information asymmetry is a major cause of implementation deviation. Decision-makers often find it difficult to gain a comprehensive understanding of the actual state of policy implementation, while implementing actors may exploit their information advantages to engage in selective or adaptive implementation. Overcoming such information asymmetry typically requires substantial investment of manpower and resources in research, inspection, and evaluation, which is costly and difficult to sustain.

Social media provides a low-cost, high-efficiency channel for information acquisition. Taking the example of Fan Zuojun, President of Guangxi University of Finance and Economics, who responded to student demands via his TikTok account, issues raised by students in the comment section—such as mouldy dormitory ceilings, missing classroom curtains, and vehicles speeding on campus—were all swiftly addressed. The university subsequently introduced specific measures including "providing 4,000 free bicycles" and a "lost takeaway meal care plan." These issues were identified and resolved without going through the traditional reporting chain of "student—advisor—department—functional division—university leadership," but were instead presented directly to decision-makers through social media comment sections. Under this model, reforms in areas such as institutional structure, personnel management, procurement, and budgeting have been fully implemented in higher education institutions, resulting in a significant enhancement of university governance efficiency.

Social media transforms dispersed, hidden, and difficult-to-quantify individual demands into public, visible, and measurable digital signals. This transformation reduces the search and verification costs for decision-makers to obtain authentic information, while also diminishing the likelihood of information being selectively filtered during transmission.

Third, the openness of social media creates accountability pressure on policy implementation. In traditional policy implementation, the actions of implementing actors often lack effective external oversight. Although policy targets may perceive the quality of implementation outcomes, they lack convenient and effective channels to express their demands or hold implementers accountable. The openness of social media has changed this dynamic.

In the case of "governance via social media in higher education institutions," students' demands are publicly displayed in social media comment sections, and the process of resolving issues is similarly transparent. This openness means that policy implementers—whether functional departments or individual staff members—face public scrutiny. Issues that fail to receive timely responses, attitudes of buck-passing, and passive handling of problems may all be publicly exposed and attract further attention. The presence of such accountability pressure compels policy implementers to pay greater attention to the demands of policy targets and to perform their implementation duties more proactively.

Nevertheless, this openness also brings certain challenges. How to balance immediate responsiveness with prudent decision-making, how to manage emotionally charged public opinion pressures, and how to protect the privacy of policy targets are all issues that must be carefully considered in the era of social media-enabled policy implementation.

In summary, social media profoundly transforms the policy implementation stage by shortening feedback loops, reducing information costs, and creating accountability pressure. Policy implementation has transitioned from a traditional top-down, one-way transmission model to one characterized by two-way interaction and dynamic adaptation. At the core of this transformation lies the way social media converts individual demands of policy targets into publicly visible digital signals, enabling decision-makers to perceive implementation effectiveness in real time, identify implementation deviations promptly, and make rapid adjustments in response.

5. The Transformation of Policy Evaluation in the Policymaking Process by Social Media

This section analyses how social media has changed the agenda setting stage in the policymaking process. The policy evaluation stage is also critical to the policymaking process. So I will analyse how social media has changed the policy evaluation stage through the way of big data, with reference to the issue of infectious disease control in the area of health policy. Policy evaluation refers to the monitoring of policy outcomes by state and social actors to test whether policies have achieved their intended goals [6].

As an online tool with a focus on social interaction, social media can generate large amounts of user data. These data are a special category of big data and can be used to improve traditional policy evaluation methods [17]. Research by UN Global Pulse explore the innovative use of data for policy evaluation in the age of big data [18]. And it is convenient to measure public attitudes and reactions to public policy by analysing data from social media such as Twitter and YouTube [18]. In the area of health policy, taking infectious disease control as an example, one study showed that it can serve as an innovative and potent way for public health monitoring when text mining techniques are applied to health-associated content shared on social media platforms [19]. It's especially useful for tracking and forecasting infectious diseases. Another study found that it is cost-effective and fast for the Indonesia government to evaluate the prevalence and control of infectious diseases by means of analysing health-related tweets on Twitter [18]. The analysis can provide real-time information for early detection and ongoing surveillance of infectious diseases. A map visualisation of tweets associated with the emergence of infectious diseases in Indonesia was generated and compared with Indonesia's official annual epidemiological reports [20]. Their findings were consistent with the reports released a few weeks later [20]. It is suggested that the use of Twitter could help the government quickly gain information about the dissemination of diseases in Indonesia [20].

Through the case of Indonesia, this paper argues that the data provided by social media has transformed policy evaluation in the health policy field in three ways. First, social media data makes it easier for rapid policy evaluation. Social media can provide large amounts of data quickly, and much of it can be delivered and updated in near real-time. Because outbreaks of infectious diseases are sudden and massively contagious, they spread quickly and can easily cause public panic. Therefore, governments need to make quick judgements and decisions. The data analysis on social media can minimise the lag in data collecting and processing that exists with traditional methods of public health surveillance, enhancing the speed of policy evaluation [21].

Second, social media data leads to continuous policy evaluation. Unlike traditional policy evaluation, which focuses on the outcomes of policy implementation, social media data provides a more convenient evaluation that allows for ongoing assessment of policy [22]. Social media allows for continuous access to enormous amounts of data, and as a result, policy evaluation could be conducted at any stage during the policymaking process [22]. This extensive data can be used for evaluation even before a policy is finalized, offering the government valuable insights into the necessity and feasibility of proposed policies. This is particularly important in the context of infectious disease policies because infectious disease policies require governments to make accurate assessments of the changing situation and keep track of policy implementation. Continuous policy evaluation can minimise the negative impact of misguided decisions and enhance the overall efficiency of the policymaking process.

Third, social media can integrate data from hard-to-reach groups, providing new ways to reach such groups. Specific groups might pose a challenge to engage with due to precarious security conditions or their remote and hard-to-reach positions. And women who typically lack a voice in certain societal contexts are also hard to reach. Social media has provided a platform for these hard-to-reach groups to express their views, enabling them to freely express their interests and demands and participate in policy evaluation. Analysis shows that social media has transformed the policy evaluation stage of the policymaking process through big data.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined how social media transforms the policymaking process. Due to space constraints, it focuses on three key stages: agenda setting, policy implementation, and policy evaluation. In the agenda-setting stage, social media reshapes the traditionally unidirectional flow of influence through networked information dissemination and strategic use of language and framing, enabling public and media agendas to exert greater pressure on the policy agenda. In the policy implementation stage, the process shifts from a top-down, one-way transmission model to one characterized by two-way interaction and dynamic adaptation. In the policy evaluation stage, social media provides abundant real-time data that facilitates rapid, continuous assessment and incorporates input from previously hard-to-reach groups.

Together, these changes restructure information flows and reconfigure relationships among policy actors, making the policymaking process more agile, inclusive, and responsive.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgements

This paper was supported by Central University of Finance and Economics under the Research Fund for Theoretical Studies on Party Building and Ideological-Political Work (Grant No. DJA25001).

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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