Challenger Networks of Food Policy on the Internet: A Comparative Study of Structures and Coalitions in Germany, the UK, the US, and Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

In times of genetically modified food, globalized production and distribution chains, food safety is a major issue in public policy. Although industrial actors have traditionally had remarkable influence on political decision-making in this area, challenger organizations from civil society have gained influence by mobilizing support and shaping public discourse on the Internet. The authors’ study analyzes online issue networks concerning food safety in order to assess the actor constellations and coalitions that may serve as an opportunity structure for the mobilization of the issue. By comparing the US, the UK, Germany, and Switzerland, the authors investigate the differences in policy settings between pluralist and corporatist democracies. They find that the mobilization structures related to food safety issues are actively promoted by the challengers themselves. In countries where challengers do not find support within national politics, the challengers’ online communication refers to mass media as witnesses to legitimize their concern in public debates.

KEYWORDS
Agenda Building, Civil Society, Food Safety, Hyperlink Networks, International Comparison, Issue Networks, Network Analysis, NGOs, Online Communication

INTRODUCTION

On January 25, 2013, the New York Times reported about Sarah Kavanagh, a 15-year-old high school student from Mississippi, whose favorite drink was Gatorade (Strom, 2013). She had learned that it contains an ingredient which is proven to cause health risks. Sarah was outraged. She went on the change.org website and launched a petition, which was signed by 200,000 supporters within a few days.
After the issue had been picked up by the mass media, the producer of Gatorade, PepsiCo, changed the recipe. The Center for Science in the Public Interest, a public advocacy group in the food and public health sector, said they had been fighting for the change of the recipe for “the last several decades” (Strom, 2013) and nothing had changed. This case relates to our study, since it shows in a nutshell the process through which issues of food safety may be mobilized on the Internet: Agenda building was driven by citizens who took action online and their campaign spilled over into the mass media and built up public and political pressure. In the political sphere, such a case may eventually result in changes in the regulation of food production. The Gatorade case raises the question of whether this observation is typical for the conditions under which food safety becomes an issue of wider public debate and potentially of political action.

While there is no doubt about the significance of food safety issues for consumers (Lien, 2004), apart from scandals and symbolic politics, the policies of food regulation have been less present in the public debate (De Jonge, Van Trijp, Renes, & Frewer, 2010; Feindt & Kleinschmit, 2011). Food policies seem to remain in the arena of negotiations between the food industry and the health and agricultural regulation bureaucracy. However, there has been growing activism among social movement actors regarding the food issue. Our study refers to challengers—that can be regarded as a subset of social movement actors “who do not have routine access to the decision-making arena or to the established media” (Kriesi, 2004, p. 196). Civil activists concerned about the issue have increasingly observed health risks connected to food and production modes (Blue, 2010; Lang, Barling, & Caraher, 2009) and are thus demanding radical, costly shifts in food production, distribution, and sale.

In the politicization of food, the constellations of actors and the conditions of communication are significant. Social movement studies suggest that challengers become active in public communication and use mass media to elevate their issues to the level of political decision-making (Chadwick, 2006, pp. 134ff.). For them, online communication offers an alternative route to the media agenda and eventually to public and political attention (Chadwick, 2006, pp. 116ff.; see also Pfetsch, Adam, & Bennett, 2013). In agenda building, challengers establish empirically observable patterns of communication on the Internet in order to build coalitions to mobilize behind issues. Therefore, the current research in contentious politics focuses on the analysis of linking patterns and online issue networks of social movement organizations (Ackland & O’Neil, 2011; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Since online issue networks include many actors from different societal subsystems, their composition and structure allow for the assessment of their strength of connectivity, which can be taken as an indicator of their mobilization potential. For instance, a dense network can be interpreted as a driver for mobilizing behind issues and setting them on the media’s agenda and the political agenda.

However, political agenda building studies stress that the dynamics of communication in the course of mobilizing behind political issues is highly context-dependent (Van Aelst, 2014). Communication and coalitions must also be considered in the light of political opportunity structures such as national patterns of interest mediation. The type of democracy that organizes the power distribution of political actors and interest groups in the structure of decision-making is crucial here because it directs information flows and media attention. Most useful in this respect is the differentiation between pluralist and corporatist democracies (Lijphart, 1999). We hypothesize on one hand that under the conditions of pluralist democracies, the mobilization behind issues largely depends on whether challengers succeed in building strong coalitions with other challengers, thus drawing media attention. On the other hand, in corporatist democracies, online issue networks are expected to be more inclusive as regards political elites and conventional interest groups.

Against this background, our study analyzes the actor constellations and structures of online issue networks concerning food safety comparing four Western democracies (Germany, the UK, the US, and Switzerland). With respect to their potential for mobilization, we ask:
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