



The contingency of governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere: A systematic literature review and meta-synthesis



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 22 December 2014
Received in revised form 21 August 2015
Accepted 13 September 2015
Available online 9 October 2015

Keywords:

Responsiveness
Internet
Social media
Public sphere
E-democracy
Systematic literature review
Meta-synthesis

ABSTRACT

The influence of the virtual public sphere in the policy process is not only dependent on the power of online media and the stakeholders who are using them. The responsiveness of governments to online policy debate is important as well. While some studies show examples of governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere, others find that online participation is largely ignored. Such contrasting findings point at a contingency of governments' responsiveness to online public debate. This article offers a systematic literature review and meta-synthesis of empirical articles that provide insight in the factors accounting for governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere. A theory-based analytical framework served as guideline for qualitative analysis of the findings of 39 studies. We found that institutional characteristics, characteristics of the policymaker, characteristics of online participation and characteristics of the policy domain are relevant conditions for governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere.

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1. Introduction

Online media have recently become popular platforms of civic engagement. Citizens are using online media to inform themselves about policy issues and government actions, form political opinions, mobilize support from others and voice their needs and preferences to policymakers (Bohman, 2004; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlgren, 2013). While some examples of online activism were successful in influencing the policy process, many others have quietly vanished and did not spur policy change (Howard & Parks, 2012). Policymakers thus are responsive to public opinion that is voiced online in some cases, but not in others. This raises the question under what circumstances online civic engagement is able to influence policies by communicating public opinion to policymakers, being politicians or administrators.

This question is at the core of public sphere theory. Structural characteristics of the internet have spurred optimistic expectations for the emergence of a virtual public sphere as they provide a contemporary version of Habermas' (1991) historical blueprint of the public sphere (Bohman, 2004; Coleman, 2005; Dahlgren, 2005). This democratic potential has been present during earlier years of the internet (often referred to as Web 1.0) in the form of online discussion forums and bulletin boards. In recent years, the user-friendly design and popularity of social media or Web 2.0 has revived scholarly debate concerning a

virtual public sphere (Dahlgren, 2009; Loader & Mercea, 2012). Even though Habermas' concept of the public sphere has been criticized for its feasibility and Habermas himself never pointed at the web as the ideal platform for the public sphere, many other scholars did (cf. Dahlgren, 2009: 158). Dahlgren (2005: 151) for example refers to the net as the 'vanguard' of the public sphere.

From the 1990s onwards, when democratic legitimacy was perceived to be under pressure, the idea of a virtual public sphere emerged as a promising alternative. At that time, voter turnout and political participation via formal channels of representation in representative democracy was in decline. Some scholars have argued that the creation of a virtual public sphere would overcome this 'democratic deficit' or 'crisis in citizenship' (Dahlgren, 2005; Coleman & Blumler, 2009). Although the technological basis of the internet and online applications may allow for open and egalitarian debate among citizens and more direct exchanges with policymakers (Bohman, 2004), the creation of a virtual public sphere could not be taken for granted. Many scholars questioned the quality of the online debates within this sphere, due to the fragmentation of online publics, inequalities in access and participation and levels of interaction (Dahlberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2004; Albrecht, 2006; Hindman, 2009; Goldberg, 2011).

Next to studying aspects of this 'digital divide' (cf. Norris, 2001; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004) related to online civic engagement such as access to and quality of online public debate, it is important to study the links between this arena of the public sphere and the policy process. Dahlgren (2001: 37) stated that: *'the relationship of political structures and the decision-making processes to the public sphere*

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is of central concern. [...] A blooming public sphere does not guarantee a democracy; it is a necessary but not sufficient ingredient.' There must be a structural link between online communicative spaces and the centers of decision-making in the form of processes of agenda setting and feedback (Kingdon, 1984; Baumgartner & Jones, 2009). The virtual public sphere is not functional unless policymakers are responsive to needs, opinions and preferences that are voiced online.

The influence of the virtual public sphere on policymaking processes has been less explored and does not yet form a coherent research tradition. Scholars have approached this question with diverse methodologies and have come to different results. Some studies demonstrate examples of governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere while others find that online debate is largely ignored. Such contrasting findings point at a contingency of governments' responsiveness to online public debate (cf. Manza & Cook, 2002). This calls for further research into the factors that account for governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere. Based on a meta-synthesis of empirical findings in the literature thus far, this paper aims to study under what conditions governments are responsive to online political participation by citizens.

The following research question is used as a guideline for systematic literature review and meta-synthesis: *What factors account for the responsiveness of governments towards policy debate in the virtual public sphere?* Meta-synthesis of earlier research findings allows us to construct a state-of-the-art of empirical knowledge and explicate theorization on this subject. In the following section, we develop an analytical framework to support our analysis of empirical findings with regard to three categories of factors. In section three we discuss our research design, being a meta-synthesis of a systematically collected sample of earlier studies. In section four the results of our analysis are presented. In section five conclusions are drawn and an outlook for further research is given.

2. Government's responsiveness to the virtual public sphere

At the core of democratic theory is the argument that citizens should be able to influence the policies that govern their lives (Held, 1996; Dahl, 2000). This requires that policymakers are responsive to public opinion. Responsiveness is defined as 'the congruence of collective public attitudes towards political issues with the policy preferences and actions of elected representatives' (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2005: 380). This entails an outcome-oriented definition of responsiveness that is dominant in political representation and agenda setting literature. It operationalizes responsiveness as the extent to which policymakers change their policy positions or spending based on shifts in public opinion (Stimson, MacKuen & Erikson, 1995; Manza & Cook, 2002; Burstein, 2003; Wlezien, 2004; Baumgartner & Jones, 2009). However, next to being an outcome in terms of policy change, responsiveness can also be defined as a policy practice which relates to a community of policy makers who share specific policy beliefs, routines and other practices, or to the attitude of individual policymakers (Aberbach & Rockman, 1994). Responsiveness is then defined as the practice of taking into account the (variety) of changing needs, wishes and claims of citizens and societal groups, which is very often expressed through issue saliences (Burstein, 2003). Responsiveness as a policy practice can be recognized in processes of policy making regardless of whether this eventually results in policy change. In our meta-synthesis of studies on governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere, we will also take this forms of responsiveness into account.

Based on e-democracy and political representation literature we have formulated an analytical model that can help us to analyze the relevant literature. This model is based on three types of characteristics that seem to be relevant in order to assess the government's responsiveness to (online) public opinion, which are: policymaker, institutional and online participation characteristics (Fig. 1).

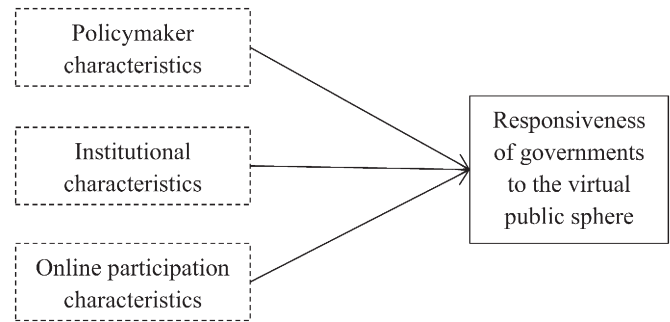


Fig. 1. Analytical framework.

In the literature, three types of characteristics are deemed relevant determinants of governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere. Firstly, it is expected that individual policymakers in politics and administration differ in their responsiveness to the public sphere. They are generally dealing with a 'bottleneck of attention' (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009). They cannot attend to all information that reaches them, so they need to select and prioritize. Based on personal experience, skills and preferences they will attend differently to online participation. For elected representatives, responsiveness is relevant with regard to their political position. Politicians have the incentive to take into account the policy preferences of voters to reduce the risk of electoral loss and the risk of public reprisals in the form of civic disobedience or protests (Brooks & Manza, 2006: 475; Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2005).

Secondly, institutional characteristics of the policy domain also influence responsiveness to the virtual public sphere. By this we mean organizational practices as well as the structure of the policy domain. Government organizations have different formal and informal rules and knowledge infrastructures in dealing with online information (Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013). Also, the availability of budget and technological tools in organizations is a factor that may explain responsiveness to the virtual public sphere. Political and administrative power relations, norms and values influence whether policymakers are responsive to online publics or not. Some policy domains are dominated by vested interests and interest groups who have created a certain policy tradition, while other domains are more open to external voices (Manza & Cook, 2002: 653). Recent studies have also shown the relevance of differences of representative systems, level of decentralization, proportionality of electoral systems, the level of political contestation and government popularity (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2005, 2008; Soroka & Wlezien, 2012). They prove that institutional characteristics are important mediators of the connection between public opinion and policy.

Thirdly, characteristics of online participation are relevant as well. It can be expected that online media and uses of these media differ in agenda setting power. Dahlgren (2005) argues that online media vary in the degree in which they comply with the structural, representational and interactional dimension of the public sphere. They have different designs and features (structural dimension), reach different publics and differ in popularity/participation (representational dimension) and differ in quality of argumentation and power to mobilize others (interactional dimension). Therefore, they will garner different degrees of government attention. With regard to the representational dimension of the public sphere, Fraser (1992) makes a distinction between strong and weak publics. This can be linked to the three tier distinction that Miège (2010) makes when discussing a layered public sphere. At the top is the elite sphere, with the organs of the state together with legislatures and the upper echelons of the corporate sector. Political discussion is linked to decision-making powers; it is a 'strong' public sphere or a strong public. The middle tier is the mainstream public sphere, mostly played out in the mass media; vested interests, parties, and other actors

with varying power dominate here. The lowest tier is the societal sphere, where private, unorganized citizens can participate in opinion-formation, but they are largely remote from the major centers or decision-making, and thus constitute a ‘weak’ public or public sphere. Fraser (1992) and Dahlgren (2013) state that most public spheres are ‘weak’ in the sense that their links to decision-making are remote. Online participation may vary in this respect.

In a meta-synthesis of relevant literature, we will look whether and how specific policymaker, institutional and online participation characteristics influence the governments’ responsiveness to the virtual public sphere. We also consider the possibility of other factors being relevant. In the next paragraph, we outline our method of data-collection and -analysis.

3. Methodology

We conducted a meta-synthesis of a systematically retrieved sample of empirical academic literature concerning governments’ responsiveness to the virtual public sphere. A systematic literature review is a ‘systematic, explicit, and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing the existing body of completed and recorded work produced by researchers, scholars and practitioners.’ (Fink, 2010: 3). In contrast to a traditional or narrative literature review, a systematic review adheres to a set of principles that aim to limit biases in the sample of studies (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006: 9; Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2009; Booth, Papaioanno, & Sutton, 2012). We followed the widely used PRISMA statement, ensuring transparent and complete reporting of the systematic literature review (Moher et al., 2009; Liberati et al., 2009).

We collected academic articles from seven different academic databases. Web of Knowledge, Scopus, ABI/Inform Complete and IBSS were chosen because they are four large scientific bibliographic databases in social sciences, including articles from a large number of sub disciplines. In addition, we selected three discipline-specific databases of disciplines relevant to the research question: Sociological Abstracts, Communication Abstracts and IPSA. The online databases cover the search period of our review from 1993 onwards, entailing a 20-year period in which internet was available to private citizens. A well-defined search string based on the research question was used to ensure sensitivity and specificity of the literature searches (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006: 81–2). The search query combines two types of search terms: The first relates to online participation, the second relates to policymakers, the political and policy process and responsiveness. During a number of initial rounds of searching the selected databases, we increased the sensitivity of the query by adding a number of keywords that appeared relevant. The final search string¹ was used consistently in all seven databases.

¹ “internet” OR “world wide web” OR “on\$line” OR “the web” OR “web 1.0” OR “web 2.0” OR “web 3.0” OR “cyberspace” OR “digital” OR “user generated content” OR “social medi” OR “new media” OR “social network” site” OR “blogosphere” OR “blog” OR “web\$log” OR “online discussion for” OR “Twitter” OR “Facebook” OR “Usenet” OR “on-line communit” OR “virtual communit” OR “media monitoring” OR “opinion mining” OR “media surveillance” OR “crowdsourcing” OR “electronic petition” OR “e\$ voting” OR “e\$petition” OR “netizen” OR “clicktivism” OR “digital” AND “municipal” OR “public administrat” OR “public organi\$ation” OR “bureaucracy” OR “agenda setting” OR “agenda building” OR “public agenda” OR “policy process” OR “policy formulation” OR “policy making” OR “policy design” OR “policy formation” OR “policy evaluation” OR “policy co\$creation” OR “policy co\$production” OR “policy legitimacy” OR “political process” OR “political decision\$making” OR “political legitimacy” OR “legislative process” OR “government process” OR “government legitimacy” OR “e-govern” OR “government responsive” OR “responsive governance” OR “interactive governance” OR “interactive polic” OR “governance” OR “democratic process” OR “democratic legitimacy” OR “e-democracy” OR “teledemocracy” OR “cyberdemocracy” OR “digital town hall” OR “electronic town hall” OR “democracy” OR “public sphere” OR “citizen participation” OR “citizen engagement” OR “civic engagement” OR “citizen co\$creation” OR “citizen activism” OR “public participation” OR “public engagement” OR “public activism” OR “e-participation”.

To ensure scientific rigor, we only included peer-reviewed publications in academic journals. This excludes gray literature such as conference proceedings and popular publications. Books and book chapters were omitted as they generally offer a less systematic description of methodology or are not empirical at all. We include only international literature that was published in English as these publications have contributed to international scholarly debate. Database searches on March 31th, 2014 yielded a total of 1630 publications. This total included 775 duplicates that were deleted from the sample. We conducted three subsequent rounds of screening in order to exclude non-relevant articles (Fig. 2; Table 1). In the first round, we screened the titles of the records based on relevance to our research question. In a subsequent round of screening, the abstracts of 313 articles were evaluated with particular attention to whether or not the records concerned empirical research.

Finally, 56 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility in the final round of screening. We removed 18 articles because they did not provide any explanations for governments’ responsiveness to social media. We sent this reference list of 38 articles to fifteen academic experts in the field to inquire whether some important articles were missing. Based on review of their suggestions, one article was added (Evans-Cowley, 2010). The final sample of 39 articles that was used for qualitative meta-synthesis is listed in Table 2.

We analyzed the findings of the systematically retrieved sample of articles via meta-synthesis which entails a qualitative comparison and translation of original findings from which new interpretations are generated (Walsh & Downe, 2005). We did this by way of manually coding the findings of the individual articles and comparing the studies based on the central concepts in our analytical model: governments’ responsiveness to online information and the factors that are named explaining presence or absence of this. We operationalized three categories of responsiveness: No mentioning of responsiveness, responsiveness as policy change (present/absent) and responsiveness as practice (present/absent). The latter type of responsiveness was operationalized as examples of policymakers answering to or taking into account online participation in their practices, while no changes in policy outcomes occurred. For example, Andersen et al. (2011) measured responsiveness as the timeliness of governments’ responses to citizen complaints.

A limitation of meta-synthesis is combining and interpreting findings from studies with different epistemological perspectives. Zimmer (2006: 315) argues that it is possible to synthesize across methodologies as long as careful attention is provided to the contextuality and methodological assumptions underpinning the primary studies. Therefore, we also coded and took into account what context (government organization, level of government, geographical context/social context, research methodologies and designs) the studies entailed. We discuss our aggregated findings in the context of our research question in order to explicate existing theories on governments’ responsiveness to the virtual public sphere (Walsh & Downe, 2005). Contradictory findings are also highlighted in the discussion of synthesized results.

4. Results

4.1. Diversity of research designs

Studies into governments’ use of online participation in the process of policymaking show a great variety of research approaches and designs. Exemplary of this is the use different terms to capture the online public sphere, such as: ‘virtual policy communities’ (Bekkers, 2004), ‘cyber-organization’ (Brainard, 2003) or ‘cyber civil society’ (Chadwick & May, 2003). A distinction between studies into the government-initiated (N = 24; 61.5%) and citizen-initiated online participation (N = 11; 28.2%) is notable in the sample of studies. The former refers to online participation venues or tools that are initiated by the government itself, while the latter concerns activities from weak and intermediate public spheres based in existing online media venues. Four articles (10.3%) study both.

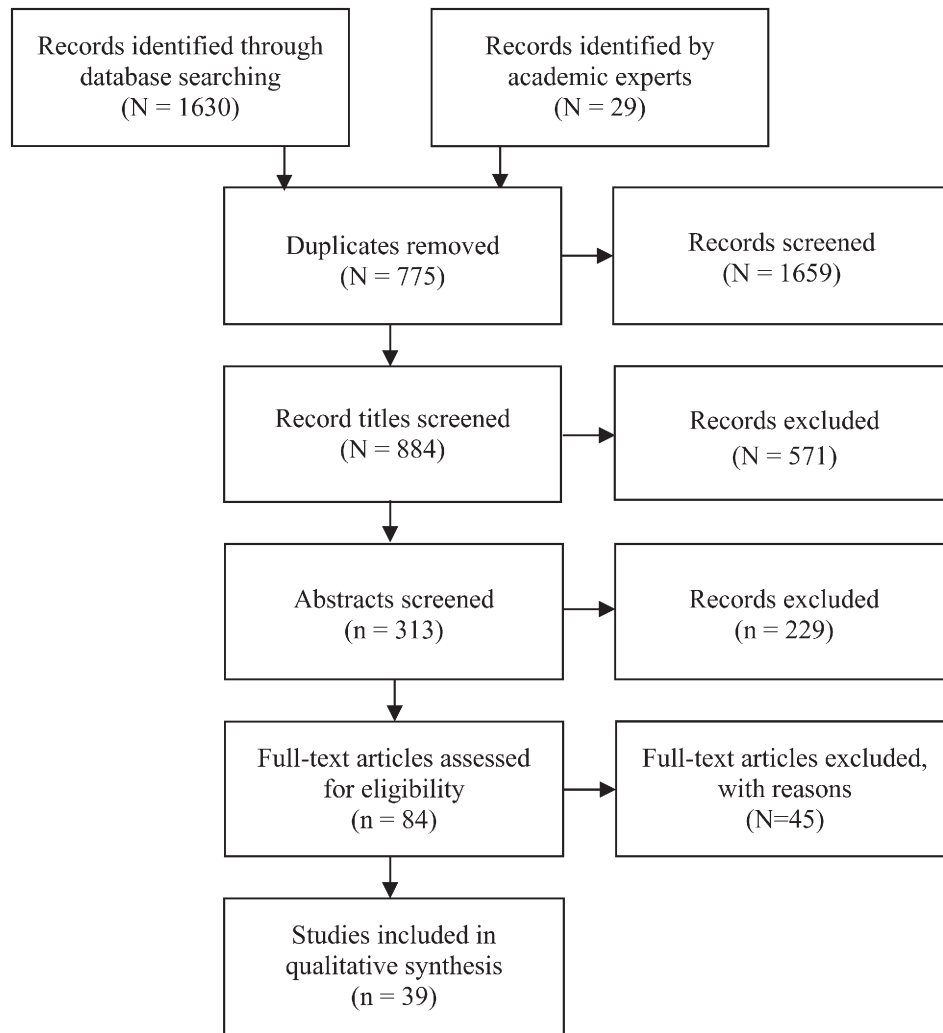


Fig. 2. PRISMA flow diagram.

Studies into government-initiated participation demonstrate responsiveness in terms of policy change or practice more often than studies of citizen-initiated online participation. Examples of studies into government-initiated online participation are Valtysson's (2014) analysis of the online collaborative rewriting of Iceland's constitution and Small's (2012) analysis of Twitter use by the Canadian government. Examples of studies into citizen-initiated online participation are Brainard's (2003) study into online HIV and DES-communities and Dutton & Lin's (2001) study of the 'Stop the Overlay' online campaign. We do not distinguish studies of government-initiated online participation and citizen-initiated online participation in discussing our findings

Table 1

Eligibility criteria for including articles in systematic literature review.

Published in English, peer-reviewed journal
 Published from 1993–2014
 Empirical research based on original data
 Relevance to the research question, excluded are articles:

- about internet governance
- about corporate governance
- about internet influencing offline political participation
- about e-government for public service delivery
- not reporting explanations for governments responsiveness to online public opinion

related to specific categories of determinants. As online government initiatives are pre-organized, they better adhere to the determinants of our analytic model overall.

We cannot conclude that government-initiated online participation initiatives are more prevalent, only that the existing literature has a bias towards this type of online citizen participation. Two reasons can be given. First, government-initiated online participation is often subjected to an evaluation study. Second, it is generally organized in a designated online venue and concerns a strictly defined policy issue. This makes the object of study fairly well demarcated as citizen-initiated online participation is often more dispersed over different online venues. That is why studies that focus on citizen-initiated online participation mostly choose a certain medium – for example Twitter – to delimit their data sample. Collecting data on policy discussions from a large diversity of social media requires specialized tools and expertise.

Furthermore, it can be noticed that studies of government-initiated and citizen-initiated online participation have different designs. Government-initiated participation is studied through analysis of the online venues or government responsiveness measured through policy documents (e.g. Klang & Nolin, 2011). Sometimes this is combined with interviews with policymakers involved in the initiative. Articles studying citizen-initiated participation often study a specific online campaign that may be present in different online media (e.g. Bekkers et al., 2011; Dutton & Lin, 2001), or conduct interviews or a survey among policymakers about their responsiveness to online participation in general (e.g. Davis, 2010; Ellison & Hardy, 2014).

Table 2
List of reviewed articles.

- Alfano, G. (2011). Adapting Bureaucracy to the Internet. The Case of Venice Local Government. *Information Polity*, 16(1), 5–22.
- Andersen, K., Medaglia, R., Vatrapu, R., Henriksen, H., & Gauld, R. (2011). The Forgotten Promise of E-Government Maturity: Assessing Responsiveness in the Digital Public Sector. *Government Information Quarterly*, 28(4), 439–445.
- Bekkers, V. (2004). Virtual Policy Communities and Responsive Governance: Redesigning On-line Debates. *Information Polity*, 9(3–4), 193–203.
- Bekkers, V., Beunders, H., Edwards, A., & Moody, R. (2011). New Media, Micromobilization, and Political Agenda Setting: Crossover Effects in Political Mobilization and Media Usage. *Information Society*, 27(4), 209–219.
- Bekkers, V., Edwards, A., & de Kool, D. (2013). Social Media Monitoring: Responsive Governance in the Shadow of Surveillance? *Government Information Quarterly*, 30(4), 335–342.
- Bonsón, E., Torres, L., Royo, S., & Flores, F. (2012). Local E-Government 2.0: Social Media and Corporate Transparency in Municipalities. *Government Information Quarterly*, 29(2), 123–132.
- Borge, R., Colombo, C., & Welp, Y. (2009). Online and Offline Participation at the Local Level. A Quantitative Analysis of the Catalan Municipalities. *Information Communication & Society*, 12(6), 1–30.
- Brainard, L. (2003). Citizen Organizing in Cyberspace: Illustrations from Health Care and Implications for Public Administration. *American Review of Public Administration*, 33(4), 384–406.
- Carlitz, R., & Gunn, R. (2002). Online Rulemaking: A Step toward E-Governance. *Government Information Quarterly*, 19(4), 389–405.
- Chadwick, A., & May, C. (2003). Interaction between States and Citizens in the Age of the Internet: “E-Government” in the United States, Britain, and the European Union. *Governance—an International Journal of Policy and Administration*, 16(2), 271–300.
- Chadwick, A. (2011). Explaining the Failure of an Online Citizen Engagement Initiative: The Role of Internal Institutional Variables. *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, 8(1), 21–40.
- Charalabidis, Y., & Loukis, E. (2012). Participative Public Policy Making through Multiple Social Media Platforms Utilization. *International Journal of Electronic Government Research*, 8(3), 78–97.
- Davis, A. (2010). New Media and Fat Democracy: The Paradox of Online Participation. *New Media and Society*, 12(5), 745–761.
- Deibert, R. (2000). International Plug ‘n Play? Citizen Activism, the Internet, and Global Public Policy. *International Studies Perspectives*, 1(3), 255–272.
- Deligiaouri, A. (2013). Open Governance and E-Rulemaking: Online Deliberation and Policy-Making in Contemporary Greek Politics. *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, 10(1), 104–124.
- Dutton, W., & Lin, W. (2001). Using the Web in the Democratic Process. The Web-Orchestrated ‘Stop the Overlay’ Cyber-Campaign. *European Review*, 9(2), 185–196.
- Ellison, N., & Hardey, M. (2014). Social Media and Local Government: Citizenship, Consumption and Democracy. *Local Government Studies*, 40(1), 21–40.
- Evans-Cowley, J., & Hollander, J. (2010). The New Generation of Public Participation: Internet-Based Participation Tools. *Planning Practice and Research*, 25(3), 397–408.
- Evans-Cowley, J. (2010). Planning in the Age of Facebook: The Use of Social Networking in Planning Processes. *Geojournal*, 75(3): 407–420.
- Ferber, P., Foltz, F., & Pugliese, R. (2005). The Internet and Public Participation: State Legislature Web Sites and the Many Definitions of Interactivity. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 25(1), 85–93.
- Fredericks, J., & Foth, M. (2013). Augmenting Public Participation: Enhancing Planning Outcomes through the Use of Social Media and Web 2.0. *Australian Planner*, 50(3), 244–256.
- Garrett, R., & Jensen, M. (2011). E-Democracy Writ Small: The Impact of the Internet on Citizen Access to Local Elected Officials. *Information, Communication & Society*, 14(2), 177–197.
- Goodman, N. (2010). The Experiences of Canadian Municipalities with Internet Voting. *CEU Political Science Journal*, 5(4), 492–520.
- Haug, A. (2007). Local Democracy Online [in Norway]: Driven by Crisis, Legitimacy, Resources, or Communication Gaps? *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, 4(2), 79–100.
- Hepburn, P. (2014). Local Democracy in a Digital Age: Lessons for Local Government from the Manchester Congestion Charge Referendum. *Local Government Studies*, 40(1), 82–101.
- Kangas, J., & Store, R. (2003). Internet and Teledemocracy in Participatory Planning of Natural Resources Management. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 62(2), 89–101.
- Klang, M., & Nolin, J. (2011). Disciplining Social Media: An Analysis of Social Media Policies in 26 Swedish Municipalities. *First Monday*, 16(8).
- Larsson, A. (2013). Bringing it all Back Home? Social Media Practices by Swedish Municipalities. *European Journal of Communication*, 28(6), 681–695.
- Mergel, I., & Bretschneider, S. (2013). A Three-Stage Adoption Process for Social Media Use in Government. *Public Administration Review*, 73(3), 390–400.
- Ohlin, T., & Becker, T. (2006). The Improbable Dream: Measuring the Power of Internet Deliberations in Setting Public Agendas and Influencing Public Planning and Policies. *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 2(1).
- Polat, R. (2005). The Internet and Democratic Local Governance: The Context of Britain. *International Information and Library Review*, 37(2), 87–97.
- Rethemeyer, R. (2007). Policymaking in the Age of Internet: Is the Internet Tending to Make Policy Networks More or Less Inclusive? *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 17(2), 259–284.
- Saebø, O., & Nilsen, H. (2004). The Support for Different Democracy Models by the Use of a Web-Based Discussion Board. *Electronic Government, Proceedings*, 3183, 23–26.
- Seltzer, E., & Mahmoudi, D. (2013). Citizen Participation, Open Innovation, and Crowdsourcing: Challenges and Opportunities for Planning. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 28(1), 3–18.
- Small, T. (2012). E-Government in the Age of Social Media: An Analysis of the Canadian Government’s use of Twitter. *Policy and Internet*, 4(3–4), 91–111.
- Soon, C., & Soh, Y. (2014). Engagement@web 2.0 between the Government and Citizens in Singapore: Dialogic Communication on Facebook? *Asian Journal of Communication*, 24(1), 42–59.
- Sutton, J. (2009). Social Media Monitoring and the Democratic National Convention: New Tasks and Emergent Processes. *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management*, 6(1), 67.
- Valtysson, B. (2014). Democracy in Disguise: The Use of Social Media in Reviewing the Icelandic Constitution. *Media, Culture and Society*, 36(1), 52–68.
- Van der Merwe, R., & Meehan, A. (2012). Direct Deliberative Governance Online [in South Africa]: Consensual Problem Solving or Accommodated Pluralism? *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, 9(1), 46–63.

The selection of relevant articles is of relatively recent date. The first relevant article was published in 2000 and the last are from 2014 and most articles stem from the mid-2000s onward (Mean: 2009; SD: 4.2). The articles are published in a large variety of academic journals. The two journals with most publications (4 each) are ‘Government Information Quarterly’ and the ‘Journal of Information Technology and Politics’. Articles are cited on average 32 times according to Google Scholar Citations (measured early May 2014). Most articles (N = 17; 43.6%) focus on responsiveness of local governments, while a smaller number of articles (N = 9; 23.1%) focuses on the national level of governance. Other articles (N = 13; 33.3%) focus on regional governments, specific government agencies or supra-national governments. Most studies were situated in the US:

a total of fifteen articles (38.5%) have a US government as (one of their) cases. Twenty-two articles focus on cases in Western European countries (56.4%). Six articles (15.4%) focus on other countries. The numbers do not add up as some articles include multiple cases.

These first descriptive results thus show that the empirical study of government’s responsiveness to the virtual public sphere is still a rather new field of study that still has to develop into a coherent empirical tradition. There is no agreement yet on central concepts and their operationalization or preferable research designs. This may account for varying findings. In the following sections, we describe what explanations for government’s responsiveness to the virtual public sphere are provided.

4.2. Responsiveness explained

In our analytical model we identified three categories of factors that may explain the responsiveness of government towards online participation. However, we also considered the possibility of other factors being relevant. Our analysis shows that the majority of articles (30 articles, 76.3%) focus on relevant institutional factors, while 7 articles (18.4%) focus on characteristics of the involved policymaker and another 13 articles (34.2%) focus on characteristics of online participation. Issue complexity proved to be another explanation offered by the literature that did not fit one of the three categories of our analytical framework. It entails the complexity of the issue according to policymakers. They state that some policy issues require professional expertise and should not be steered by public opinion of ordinary citizens. Issue complexity was mentioned in four articles (10.3%) as an explanation for the degree of responsiveness. The percentages exceed 100% as some articles name multiple explanations. From these descriptive results we cannot conclude that some explanations have more explanatory value than others. The relative popularity of different types of explanations was mainly a result of research design. Institutional explanations constitute the main focus of research into responsiveness to the virtual public sphere as responsiveness was mostly operationalized on a systems level. The meta-synthesis however enables us to specify what explanations and mechanisms can be found in explaining governments' responsiveness to online participation.

4.2.1. Policymaker characteristics

Skills and competences of individual policymakers are named as explanations for the responsiveness of governments to online participation (Table 3).

Carlitz & Gunn (2002) and Soon & Soh (2014) mention that responsiveness to online media requires an active role of policymakers. Instead of waiting until the news reaches them, they need to actively search for online citizen participation and encourage it. Their ability and willingness to provide feedback to the contributions of citizens will motivate citizens to continue (Valtysson, 2014). This is an example of practice-based responsiveness. Responsiveness to online participation also requires the availability of different techniques and the abilities to work with them. 'Media literacy' (Seltzer & Mahmoudi, 2013; Soon & Soh, 2014) is sometimes mentioned as a relevant factor. Policymakers need to be ICT-savvy in working with new media and high-tech tools (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010).

Secondly, responsiveness to online participation is dependent on how policymakers perceive their professional roles. Two articles found that policymakers perceive tensions between their private and professional roles and boundaries in dealing with online citizen participation (Klang & Nolin, 2011; Soon & Soh, 2014). Communication via online media creates a closer and more egalitarian relationship between citizens and policymakers. As Soon and Soh (2014: 53) write with regard to Facebook use by Singaporean ministers: 'Members of the public are included in ministers' social networks based on the supposition of friendship.' Communication via online media is generally less formal. On the one

hand the unscripted and spontaneous character makes policymakers more accessible, but on the other hand policymakers feel that the communication needs to comply with their professional role. Due to these perceived public-professional tensions, guidelines for responsiveness to online participation are developed (Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013).

Finally, some articles offer explanations based on the position of policymakers in policy networks. Rethemeyer (2007) argues that online media can work as exogenous shocks or strategic surprises (cf. Bekkers et al., 2011) to actors in policy networks that may shift the power relations within these networks. As a result, policymakers may be reluctant to take online debate seriously as it might challenge in their position in networks where the policy is negotiated (Bekkers, 2004; Ohlin & Becker, 2006; Rethemeyer, 2007).

4.2.2. Institutional characteristics

A majority of the reviewed articles name institutional characteristics as determinants of governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere (Table 4). In the first place, several studies mention the availability of institutional resources or provisions. Policymakers sometimes do not have access to social media in their workspace. Monitoring and responding to online citizen participation requires more time than traditional media monitoring. Some studies have described a lack of resources to buy or develop a tool for (monitoring) online participation. Charalabidis and Loukis (2012) find that the creation of a new organizational unit is required to organize and manage multiple e-participation channels and to analyze the large quantities of both structured data (e.g. citizens' ratings) and unstructured data (e.g. citizens' postings in textual form). Time, money and access to tools need to be available for successfully taking into account online citizen participation.

Secondly, many studies conclude that a change in institutional values and practices is required for governments to be responsive to online participation. Public organizations are used to dealing with citizens in a 'technocratic' (Brainard, 2003), 'law enforcing' (Charalabidis & Loukis, 2012) or 'managerial' way (Chadwick & May, 2003), which does not comply with the reality of online citizen participation. This translates in a risk averse, hierarchical oriented government culture or – in terms of Hepburn (2014: 96) a 'sclerotic institutional anxiety associated with new ICTs' – that does not fit with the rather open, egalitarian culture that is associated with new technologies. There is a mismatch between what online publics require of participation and the channels of participation offered by governments.

Some studies argue that this due to the fact that online publics and government organizations adhere to different democratic models: the participatory model versus the representative model (Bekkers, 2004; Saebo & Nilsen, 2004). Government organizations have difficulties to get accustomed to the style and language of interaction in online media and the culture that characterizes them, that is quite different compared to traditional channels of participation and representation (Charalabidis & Loukis, 2012). Deibert (2000: 271) concludes that: 'such a profound transformation in the world political landscape raises fundamental questions about the basic structures of political participation and representation' Bekkers (2004) agrees with this analysis. He states that

Table 3
Policymaker explanations of governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere.

Category	Explanations	Articles	N (%)
Policymaker characteristics	Competencies and skills	Carlitz & Gunn, 2002 Soon & Soh, 2014 Seltzer & Mahmoudi, 2013 Valtysson, 2014 Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010	5 (13.6%)
	Tensions professional role	Klang & Nolin, 2011 Soon & Soh, 2014	2 (5.3%)
	Position of policymaker in policy networks	Klang & Nolin, 2011 Soon & Soh, 2014 Bekkers et al., 2011	4 (10.5%)

Table 4
Institutional explanations of governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere.

Category	Explanations	Articles	N (%)
Institutional characteristics	Institutional values and practices	Alfano, 2011	15 (36.8%)
		Charalabidis & Loukis, 2012	
		Deligiaouri, 2013	
		Fredericks & Foth, 2013	
Sutton, 2009			
Klang & Nolin, 2011			
Ellison & Hardy, 2014			
Brainard, 2003			
Hepburn, 2014			
Chadwick & May, 2003			
Saebo and Nilsen, 2004			
Deibert, 2000			
Bekkers, 2004			
Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013			
Evans-Cowley, 2010	5 (13.6%)		
Larsson, 2007			
Borge et al., 2009			
Institutional resources	Institutional resources	Davis, 2010	11 (26.3)
		Chadwick, 2011	
		Hepburn, 2014	
		Charalabidis & Loukis, 2012	
		Chadwick, 2011	
		Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010	
		Haug, 2007	
		Hepburn, 2014	
		Sutton, 2009	
		Ellison & Hardy, 2014	
		Garrett & Jensen, 2011	
		Soon & Soh, 2014	
		Polat, 2005	
Evans-Cowley, 2010	7 (18.4%)		
Andersen et al., 2011			
Bonson et al., 2012			
Ellison & Hardy, 2014			
Hepburn, 2014			
Polat, 2005			
Bekkers et al., 2013			
Goodman, 2010			

online participation challenges the primacy of elected representatives in political decision-making. Responsiveness to online media requires re-consideration of established practices, roles and power relations to enhance the viability of a virtual public sphere.

Thirdly, some articles conclude that responsiveness to online media is dependent on political motivations. Responsiveness to online media is advantageous to smaller parties and back bench MPs (Davis, 2010). This might be explained by indications that the majority of online citizen participation is opposing government plans (Evans-Cowley, 2010). Also, political color of parties influences their preferences to the adoption of e-participation (Chadwick, 2011). Larsson (2007) shows that leftist parties are more likely to use Facebook. Borge et al. (2009) found that leftist councils are more responsive to participation in general, but this effect does not exist for online participation.

Fourth and finally, path dependency and isomorphism are named as determinants of the responsiveness to online participation. By path dependency we mean the tendency of government actions and policies to reflect earlier actions and policies (cf. Pierson, 2000). Bonson et al. (2012) state that marginal use of online media can be explained by prior negative experiences with e-government tools. This influence of prior practices is also recognized by Ellison & Hardy (2014) and Hepburn (2014). Polat (2005) concludes that governments that are already open to (online) participation, are more likely to continue doing so. When government organizations consider it to be an external pressure, they have difficulty to digest this change. They perceive of online participation as being 'no part of the job'.

Polat (2005) mentions normative homogenization and isomorphism as explanations. These concern copying actions of other governmental organization either by normative pressure or mimicking

positive examples (cf. DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). The external demand of adopting online participation practices accounts for differences between local and national governments (Andersen et al., 2011; Goodman, 2010) and between departments dealing with policy development and implementation (Bekkers et al., 2013). Local governments are usually considered first-tier organizations for citizen-government contact. Also departments dealing with policy development will have a higher need for participation of citizens than department solely dealing with implementation.

4.2.3. Online debate characteristics

Characteristics of online debate – or at least how they are perceived by policymakers – constitute a third group of explanations for the governments' responsiveness to online media (Table 5). Governments mention several concerns in dealing with online participation. Early studies of e-participation projects name internet access and skills of citizens as an issue of concern (Kangas & Store, 2003). Also later studies mention that participation of a broad group of citizens – in terms of representativeness (cf. Dahlgren, 2005) – is not ensured and therefore online media are not seen as a suitable channel of participation (Seltzer & Mahmoudi, 2013; Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010).

With regard to this representational dimension of online participation as well, studies highlight the importance of a (perceived) demand for responsiveness by the population (Haug, 2007; Small, 2012). Borge et al. (2009) found in a comparison of Catalonian municipalities that population size and average age are significant determinants of the start of online participation initiatives. A greater number of citizens and a younger population are perceived to have a higher demand for online participation opportunities. Also Fredericks and Foth (2013)

Table 5
Online participation explanations of governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere.

Category	Explanations	Articles	N (%)
Online participation characteristics	Representational dimension: participation of (new) publics	Kangas & Store, 2003 Seltzer & Mahmoudi, 2013 Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010 Dutton & Lin, 2001 Bekkers et al., 2011	5 (13.6%)
	Representational dimension: perceived demand	Haug, 2007 Small, 2012 Borge et al., 2009 Fredericks & Foth, 2013 Kangas & Store, 2003 Polat, 2005	6 (15.8%)
	Interactional dimension: quality of online participation	Ferber et al., 2005 Hepburn, 2014 Seltzer & Mahmoudi, 2013 Goodman, 2010	4 (10.5%)

found differences between urban population sizes in governments' responsiveness to online participation. Larsson (2013) found that higher educated populations and larger administrations are significant predictors of the uptake of social media by Swedish municipalities, but population size however is not. Larsson's study shows that administration size probably moderates the relationship between population size and governments' responsiveness to online participation. The lack of demand by citizens is named as a reason for not implementing online participation initiatives or governments' lack of responsiveness (Polat, 2005). When socio-demographic characteristics of the population indicate that there is little internet access and familiarity, governments will be less responsive to online participation (Kangas & Store, 2003).

On the interactional dimension of online media, some studies detect reluctance of governments to be responsive to online participation due to the quality of debate (Goodman, 2010; Seltzer & Mahmoudi, 2013; Hepburn, 2014). The status of online discussion in the policy process is controversial due to anonymity and unconstructive contributions (cf. Papacharissi, 2004). Governments are afraid that venues of online participation 'will be dominated by a few crackpots or manipulated by special interests' (Ferber et al., 2005: 92). Hepburn (2014) states that online participation is perceived to be vulnerable to political manipulation. Participation tools can be hijacked by certain stakeholders, compromising the representativeness of outcomes. Governments find the authenticity of online contributions hard to judge and therefore are hesitant to let online contributions influence policy outcomes.

4.2.4. Other factors

Next to specifying explanations within the categories of our analytical framework, our review also revealed that the type of policy issue matters (Table 6).

Complex (Kangas & Store, 2003), 'wicked' (Van der Merwe & Meehan, 2013) or 'politically divisive' (Hepburn, 2014) issues are perceived to be less suited for citizen opinion-formation, deliberation and mobilization online. Studies show that with regard to such technical issues, expert knowledge is preferred over the 'wisdom of the crowds' (cf. Surowiecki, 2004). As Deligiaouri (2013: 119) states: 'Specialized and technical draft laws are less applicable for public commenting as they require from participants good and sometimes specialized knowledge of the topic.'. This might be valid for citizen participation in general, but

seems even more so for online participation online, in which the identity and expertise of participants often remains hidden.

5. Conclusions

This literature review studied what factors account for the responsiveness of governments towards policy discussion in the virtual public sphere. Our findings show that the role of the virtual public sphere in the policy process is not only dependent on the power of the media and the stakeholders who are using them. The practices of governments are very important as well. We were able to uncover this side of the agenda setting process by taking responsiveness as a central concept. This literature review resulted in a specified explanatory model of governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere with four categories of explanations (Fig. 3). The influence of the virtual public sphere in the policy process is contingent with regard to individual policymaker characteristics, institutional characteristics, perceived characteristics of online participation and characteristics of the policy issue at hand.

Institutional characteristics as explanations for governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere have been most prominent in empirical research thus far. This may be due to the fact that responsiveness to the public sphere is mostly defined as an institutional characteristic: the responsiveness of certain policy domains or governance systems. Studies focusing on individual policymakers and their perceptions of online media and issue complexity show that the agency of individual policymakers is relevant as well. They have certain levels of experience and preferences in dealing with (online) media. Their responsiveness to online debate is diminished by anonymity and concerns with authenticity of online content. This lack of trust in citizen participation will negatively influence the involvement of their contributions in the policy process (cf. Yang, 2005). Complex policy issues are considered to be less suitable for citizen participation in general and online participation in particular. Moyonner-Smith (2006) however shows that online laymen's knowledge can contribute even in a complex decision-making process as the built of a Parisian airport. It can even empower the participation of citizens. Policymaker perceptions and scientific evidence thus disagrees on whether layman's knowledge can be useful in complex and highly technical policy problems.

Studies focused on government-initiated online participation generally encountered higher levels of government responsiveness than studies focusing on citizen-initiated online participation. Representativeness of participation and quality of debate are however weak factors in such top-down designs of a virtual public sphere. They delimit citizens' choice in topic of discussion, tone of debate and ways of expressing themselves. As a result, many studies conclude that the government-initiated participation was not really successful in terms of numbers of participants or degree of online interaction between citizens and policymakers. Citizen-initiated practices of online participation have

Table 6
Other explanations of governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere.

Category	Explanations	Articles	N (%)
Other	Issue complexity	Kangas & Store, 2003 Van der Merwe & Meehan, 2013 Hepburn, 2014 Deligiaouri, 2013	4 (10.5%)

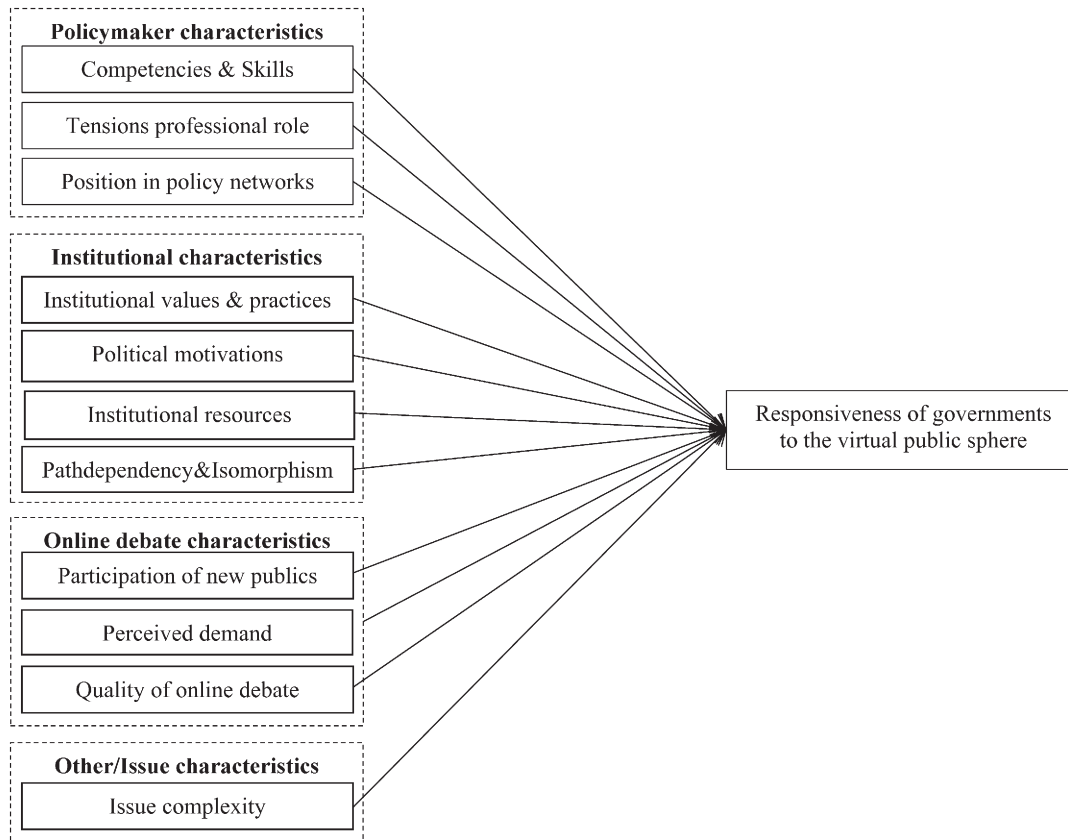


Fig. 3. Explanatory model.

the potential to attract larger numbers and greater diversity of citizens. There are examples of vivid public spheres with mobilization, critical argumentation and voicing opinions to policymakers. Responsiveness to citizen-initiated online participation is however restricted by three critical factors on the institutional, issue and policymaker dimension: governments are lacking *awareness*, *access* and *acquaintance* in being responsive to - let alone to participate in - citizen-initiated discussions.

Responsiveness to the virtual public sphere is a merit in terms of democratic legitimacy and relevant from a more strategic concern of public reprisals in the form of civic disobedience or protests and risking electoral loss (cf. Brooks & Manza, 2006). Too much government responsiveness is however undesirable as a volatile environment will undermine the stability and functioning of the policy field. A tendency of populism is risked when a system is only responding to its external context of public preferences without formulating long-term policy objectives. Policies and policymakers need to be responsive to external claims while continuously pursuing more long-term goals.

The method of systematic literature review and meta-synthesis of the findings has a number of limitations. We cannot make any statements about the importance and prevalence of certain explanations as they may be more representative of research choices than of the empirical reality. The literature is still too much in a state of development and the sample is too small and diverse to assume that the findings represent all instances of government's responsiveness to the virtual public sphere. Furthermore, as outlined in the methodology section, we only included peer-reviewed scholarly articles in our sample. This omits possibly relevant conference proceedings, working papers, dissertations, books and book chapters. However, we choose the quality assurance of peer review over gaining a larger sample of publications.

While communicative aspects of the virtual public sphere have been a popular object of study over the past years, research into its links with the centers of decision-making is still in its early stages. This is characterized by many (single) case-studies, conceptual and methodological

diversity and publications in a great variety of journals. A coherent research tradition has not yet been established. We propose three directions for future research. Firstly, future research should focus its efforts on citizen-initiated online participation as this is underrepresented in current research. This type of online participation seems to be more promising as a virtual public sphere than government-initiated participation projects which often have problems with motivating citizens to participate and still are very similar to offline channels of participation. This type of research requires sophisticated tools and methods as citizen contributions will not be centered in one online venue, but dispersed over the Web.

Secondly, the agency of individual policymakers is often overlooked in studies into the responsiveness. Our review shows that their resources and competencies as well as their perceptions of the quality of online debate and the complexity of the policy issue constitute an important explanation for governments' responsiveness to the virtual public sphere. Politicians and administrators are often the subject of research into the utilization of social media for distributing information to the public, but less when it comes to being responsive to online debate. Research should focus on the competencies and skills of policymakers in dealing with online civic engagement, tensions with regard to their professional role and varying responsiveness related to policymakers' positions in policy networks. Also their perceptions of online participation and the complexity of the policy issue at hand influence their responsiveness to online participation and should be taken into account.

Lastly, and related to the previous point, our research shows that a broader conceptualization of responsiveness will result in a more comprehensive understanding of governments' responsiveness to the virtual sphere. There is a tendency to conceptualize responsiveness as a system characteristic that can be measured by policy change as a result of the policy process. This is an outcome-oriented definition of responsiveness implying that without any changes in policy, there has been no responsiveness. With regard to the virtual public sphere that includes a

great variety of opinion, such an outcome-oriented definition of responsiveness is not sufficient. Adding a practice-based conceptualization of responsiveness as an attitude of individual policymakers provides a more comprehensive outlook on responsiveness when it comes to the virtual public sphere. These directions for further research will contribute to gaining a better understanding of the impact of the virtual public sphere in the policy process.

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