Social media as public sphere: a stakeholder perspective

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SOCIAL MEDIA AS PUBLIC SPHERE: A STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVE

Abstract:

Purpose: Despite the potential of social media, it has proven difficult to get people actively involved in the decision-making processes. There is a need for more research on how stakeholders manage and use social media to communicate. Thus, we examine major stakeholders' communication preferences in eParticipation initiatives and discuss how this affects the public sphere.

Design/methodology/approach: The study was conducted as a qualitative case study. Data sources include interviews, social media content, document analysis and field notes.

Findings: Communication preferences of stakeholders vary according to their salience level. Stakeholders with higher salience are less likely to participate in social media, while those who are less salient will use every available medium to gain influence. This challenges the opportunity to create a traditional public sphere in social media.

Research limitations/implications: We contribute to a better understanding of who participates in social media and why. Stakeholder salience analysis shows that in the case of citizen-initiated eParticipation, social media cannot be seen as a Habermasian public sphere.

Practical implications: We suggest two approaches for government officials' handling of social media: 1) to treat social media as a channel for input and knowledge about the concerns of citizen groups and 2) to integrate social media in the formal processes of decision making in order to develop consultative statements on specific policy issues.

Social implications: The study shows that power and urgency are the most important salience attributes. These findings indicate that 1) social media may not be as inclusive as early research indicates, and 2) less active social media users may have power and influence through other channels.

Originality/value: Our findings extend current knowledge of the public sphere by adding the stakeholder perspective in addition to existing evaluative models of the public sphere.

Keywords: eParticipation, social media, stakeholder theory, public sphere

1   Introduction

The representative democracy of industrialised nations is in decline, with a decrease in voter turnout by around 10 per cent from 1955 to 1997 (Gray and Caul, 2000). Decreased voter participation combined with increased distance between the political system and citizenry may result in increased mistrust of political systems (Susha and Grönlund, 2014). Citizens also tend to identify less with trade unions, the church and traditional class distinctions (Gray and Caul, 2000). This breakdown of group identity has altered participation from voting in elections and participating in broad social movements and political parties toward a more individualized form of participation, where single issues are more important than political ideology (Bennett, 2012).

As society becomes increasingly digitised, governments are attempting to boost democratic interest through various eParticipation programmes (Wattal et al., 2010, Macintosh et al., 2005). eParticipation can be defined as 'a set of technology-facilitated participatory processes, both deliberative and decision oriented' (Sæbø et al., 2008), where participation is understood as joining in some form of discussion, activity or decision making. Many eParticipation projects fail to attract large groups of citizens and change the way politicians work

(Chadwick, 2008) either due to low interest (Sæbø et al., 2009), lack of purpose and rules for conversation (Hurwitz, 2003) or a lack of citizen participation (Sotirios et al., 2011, Kolsaker, 2005). Recent studies of eParticipation projects in the EU show that only 15 per cent of those invited actually participated (Sotirios et al., 2011). In the US, only one-fifth of Internet users participate (Christopher, 2011). Hence, triggering the interests of stakeholders is seen as vital in most eParticipation efforts (Sæbø et al., 2011), and more research is needed to explore citizen-initiated eParticipation initiatives (Federici et al., 2015).

Social media, here defined as 'a group of Internet-based technologies that allows users to easily create, edit, evaluate and/or link to content or other creators of content' (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), p.61), is being used increasingly by local governments (Mainka et al., 2014) and has the potential to engage stakeholders in future eParticipation projects (Effing et al., 2011). Social media encourages dialogue between citizens and government (Yi et al., 2013) and contributes to agenda setting (Conway et al., 2015). Government use of social media has also been shown to increase citizens' trust in the government (Hong, 2013). However, local governments have not yet realized the potential of social media for eParticipation (Bonsón et al., 2012).

With no preordained outcome when introducing social media (Shirky, 2011), a need exists for more research on how stakeholders manage and use social media to communicate in such citizen-initiated eParticipation efforts. Previous research fails to explain how stakeholders use social media to impact decision-making rather than for mere opinion expression and discussion (Ferro et al., 2013). Therefore, the role of social media needs to be examined more thoroughly to understand its influence on online deliberation (Criado et al., 2013) and to explore how and by whom social media use is initiated (Abdelsalam et al., 2013). Research should pay more attention to the consequences for different stakeholders who use social

media to perform democratic processes, because social media is seen as an opportunity to redesign stakeholders' roles and responsibilities (Susha and Grönlund, 2014).

To understand how the use of social media by various stakeholders influences democratic purposes, we introduce the concept of the "public sphere." The public sphere has been used as a philosophical grounding for several eParticipation studies (Sanford and Rose, 2007) that focus on the consequences of introducing Information and Communication Technology. The public sphere is defined as 'that domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed' (Habermas, 1989). It provides researchers with a useful concept for explaining the importance of participation. The public sphere is introduced to explore various stakeholders' communication preferences. Our specific research questions are: *What communication preferences do major stakeholders have in their efforts to influence the decisions being made* and *how does this fit into ideal forms of the public sphere?*

Through an urban planning case in a Norwegian municipality, we explore the relationship between stakeholder salience and their communication preferences. The stakeholders involved are analysed according to their preferred modes of communication. Stakeholder salience has proved useful in recent studies to explain stakeholder actions in eParticipation efforts (Axelsson et al., 2013, Saebo et al., 2011), so we decided to explore communication patterns through the lens of salience analysis. Our analysis suggests that varying degrees of salience impact the types of communication different stakeholders prefer and that this has implications for the public sphere and democratic dialogue in social media.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The following section presents the related research on which we built our arguments. Then we describe our research methodology and introduce the case. In the findings section, we analyse stakeholder groups, including their

relationships and communication preferences, before discussing the use of social media as a public sphere in light of our findings. We conclude by offering suggested implications.

2   Related research

In this section, we present the public sphere as our theoretical grounding and stakeholder theory as our analytical lens. We also introduce the public sphere to discuss the consequences of introducing social media in citizen-initiated eParticipation projects, reflecting on how our case study contributes to the field in general. We apply stakeholder theory as our analytical lens to provide a detailed understanding of stakeholders and their communication preferences. Combining the two provides a theoretical grounding for our analysis of the communication preferences of different stakeholder groups.

2.1   The public sphere
The public sphere could be defined as 'that domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed'. It is an autonomous 'place' where citizens can debate government policy and act as an informal correction when governments step out of bounds (Habermas, 1989), separate from the state and economic interests (Habermas, 1989, Frazer, 1999). The public sphere can be understood as a mediating layer between government and citizen, where citizens discuss and agree on issues of public interest, because it is 'the interaction between citizens, civil society, and the state, communicating through the public sphere, that ensures that the balance between stability and social change is maintained' (Castells, 2008)(p.79).

The 'public' part of the public sphere can be defined as, 'all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for' (Dewey, 1927 p. 15). To identify these consequences, we need an informed and talking public: 'There is no state without

government, but also there is none without the public' (Dewey, 1927 p. 67). Thus, public opinion is the shared understanding of an issue, reached through debate by rational citizens (Habermas, 1991), and it is considered a necessary function in a modern democracy. 'The public sphere is an essential component of socio-political organization because it is the space where people come together as citizens and articulate their autonomous views to influence the political institutions of society' (Castells, 2008)(p.78). If no public sphere or organized public existed to act as a check on an individual's power, it would be a lot easier for strong individuals to control the state and overrule the interests of others (Dewey, 1927).

Mass media and the commoditization of information, along with the disappearance of physical spaces for assembly and debate, is said to have brought an end to civic values and the sense of public-ness that are so important to the public sphere (Putnam, 2000). Other scholars contest this view, pointing to the Internet as a medium where the public sphere is very much alive and functioning (Dahlgren, 2005, Gimmler, 2001, Papacharissi, 2002, Poster, 1997). Studies of political participation indicate that Internet use has led to an increase in the public's political interest (Gibson et al., 2005). Therefore, it is claimed that the public sphere of today is no longer a physical space. Rather, it is found in the media and in networks and acts as the 'cultural/informational repository of the ideas and projects that feed public debate' (Castells, 2008)(p.79).

While any discussion space can be seen as forming public opinion, several scholars, including Habermas, have presented strict criteria for spaces that can be identified as part of the public sphere. Dahlberg (2001), building on Habermas' original work, has identified six requirements for a functioning public sphere: 1) It must be *autonomous* from state and economic power. 2) It should be based on a *rational-critical discourse*, where participants are engaged in reciprocal critique of normative positions that are criticisable rather than dogmatic claims. 3) Participants must be *reflective* and critically examine their cultural values,

assumptions and interests as well as the larger social context. 4) Participants must attempt to *understand* the argument from the other's perspective. 5) Each participant must make an effort to *make known all information* relevant to the particular problem under consideration. 6) Everyone is *equally entitled* to introduce and question ideas and issues. Dahlberg´s perspectives allow us to explore how our findings relate to a functioning public sphere.

Dahlberg's criteria are part of what Splichal (2006) calls the 'strong' public sphere, as opposed to the 'weak' public sphere, which is concerned only with freedom of the press. Critics hold that defining the public sphere using these strict criteria leads to an idealised and impossible to reach 'space' for a small proportion of the public. In the information society, it makes less sense to talk about bourgeois or working class. We have all become 'citizens of the media' (Hartley, 1996), and the public of today is different from the public of the past. This means that one should not judge the present with the ideals of the past.

In a globalised, fragmented and multi-faceted world, we need to allow for a variety of voices and forms of communication. Reflecting this view, Trenz and Eder (2004) present four ideal types of the public sphere: 1) Discourse-based. This is the ideal type closest to Habermas' original idea of a space for free thought and discussion 2) Based on political protest, where we typically find groups of like-minded people discussing, for example, strategies for protest. 3) Based on political campaigning, such as campaign web sites for political parties or individual politicians. 4) Based on consensus, where there is little disagreement, and people support each other. These ideal types of public spheres extend the original concept to better fit with the complex and multi-layered society of today.

A lack of attention to issues of public interest has been flagged as one of the major challenges to digital democracy (Muhlberger, 2005). Online activities tend to be focused on people's interests. When people socialise only with others who have the same interests, we lose that

space in society where people of diverse backgrounds can assemble, debate and shape public opinion (Calhoun, 1998).

2.2 *Stakeholder theory*

Stakeholder theory (ST) contains frameworks that enable analyses to provide in-depth understanding of complex social settings. Given the need to understand the various interests at play in a public sphere, ST is considered an appropriate theoretical perspective for our study, because as it directly addresses our need to understanding different interests. In addition, several scholars (Flak and Rose, 2005, Scholl, 2001) have proposed it as a suitable theory for our context.

ST emerged in the management literature during the 1980s and is well suited as a theoretical basis for analysing complex eGovernment efforts (Flak and Rose, 2005) to understand how stakeholders affect developments and also how they themselves are affected (Scholl, 2005, Klischewski and Scholl, 2006, Flak et al., 2008). ST has also been applied to study the dynamics of eParticipation by analysing various attributes that make up different stakeholders' degree of salience (Sæbø et al., 2011), showing that the degree of urgency felt by each stakeholder is central in determining which of the stakeholders are more likely to participate.

In 1997, Mitchell et al (1997) proposed a framework for determining stakeholder salience, defining salience as 'The degree to which managers give priority to competing stakeholder claims' (p. 869). Originally, salience was assessed according to whether or not a stakeholder possesses various combinations of power, legitimacy and urgency. These attributes were considered in a binary fashion, i.e. either a stakeholder has power (or legitimacy or urgency) or does not. The presence of all three attributes suggests a higher degree of salience than just one or two. In previous years, more detailed analyses of salience have been proposed and tried in practice (Klieschewski and Scoll, 2006) and also in the context of eGovernment (e.g.

(Scholl, 2005, Flak et al., 2008)) and eParticipation (e.g. (Axelsson et al., 2013, Saebo et al., 2011). These salience analyses challenge the view that each attribute should be assessed in binary terms and suggest that each attribute can be assigned scores of low, medium or high to provide a more nuanced view of salience. This resonates with our use of the term.

Studying salience attributes allows for a detailed understanding of why some stakeholders act to protect their interests while others do not. Further, determining salience is a way of analysing power between stakeholders. Salience is composed of power, legitimacy and urgency. Figure 1 presents a stakeholder typology defining these attributes (Mitchell et al., 1997).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Stakeholders possessing all three attributes are more salient toward decision makers than stakeholders who possess only one or two of the attributes. Such a stakeholder would likely receive attention not only because this person or group represents a legitimate claim but also because the person or group will also be likely to exercise power due to a sense of urgency. For example, it is possible to imagine that a politician could be more interested in exercising his or her legitimate powers to influence political decisions shortly before an election because of an increased sense of urgency to be re-elected. Both stakeholders and salience represent dynamic phenomena that should be analysed regularly.

3   Research methodology

We conducted this study as an interpretive case study. The objective of qualitative research is 'understanding . . . by investigating the perspectives and behaviour of the people in these situations and the context within which they act' (Kaplan and Maxwell, 2005)(p.30). Qualitative studies are well suited for exploratory studies and for answering why and how something happens (Marshall and Rossman, 1999, Kaplan and Maxwell, 2005). Case studies are particularly suited to research on new phenomena where the experiences and interpretations of the actors and the wider context are important factors (Cresswell, 2009).

The interpretive research philosophy requires researchers to approach the data in an open manner and to be willing to modify assumptions and the theories used in analysing the data in an iterative, hermeneutic process (Walsham, 1995). Our initial objective was to explore how local government stakeholder groups use social media. We chose an urban planning case from a municipality in southern Norway for the following reasons:

1. **Richness.** The municipality has a history of citizen engagement, and the number of actors involved makes it an ideal case for stakeholder analysis. Further, the process has a long history, dating back almost 30 years to the first plans for developing the area.

2. **Transferability**. While the case is localised to a Norwegian municipal context, it should be possible to transfer the case findings to other cases of political activism. The reactions of the respondents is typical activist behaviour and very similar to the reactions in, for example, the seven activist cases researched by Button and Mattson (1999).

3. **Contextual awareness**. The first author followed the case as a citizen for several years before engaging in it from a research perspective, which leads to a thorough understanding of the case context.

As interpretive researchers, we are aware of the possible bias to which this closeness can lead (Walsham, 1995). Triangulation is an established criterion for avoiding bias (Yin, 2009) and is especially useful in studies of online activities (Sade-Beck, 2008). This is why we have collected data from several sources and applied different analytical techniques (e.g. interviews, document analysis) in the study. Additionally, the data was analysed by three different researchers, and the analysis process adhered closely to the steps outlined in our analytical framework of stakeholder salience and the public sphere.

The interviews, 12 in total, were conducted over a 10-month period. Interview respondents represented different stakeholder groups, as indicated in Table 1, which presents a summary of the interviews, with the first impression of notable findings recorded by the first author directly after the interview session.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

The respondents were selected from a list of formal stakeholders provided to us by city officials. In addition, we attempted to identify additional stakeholders by asking each respondent if there were additional stakeholders who should be included in the study. This attempt at snowballing did not provide us with any additional stakeholders.

There is a different number of respondents for each stakeholder group, because each group contains a different number of organisations. For the city council, we interviewed representatives from the political parties represented. In the city administration, we interviewed one of the city's architects as well as the head of planning and development. In local media, we interviewed the journalist who was responsible for covering the case, and we had some e-mail exchanges with another reporter who covered the case on occasion. There were three main activist groups, and we interviewed the leaders of each. Finally, we interviewed a representative of the regional government's heritage office, which has formal power to stop the planning process. Unfortunately, we were not able to interview the private investor responsible for developing the property. However, his representative was empowered to speak on his behalf. The developer was the only stakeholder in the process who was openly in favour of development.

Interviews should be supplemented by other forms of data (Walsham, 2006), which, in our case, were as important as the interviews. The first author attended one workshop meeting and two city council meetings as an outside observer (Walsham, 1995). We also collected and analysed case documents for the decision-making process between 2007 and 2011. These documents include minutes from council meetings, consultancy reports, architectural plans, formal hearing documents and the results of two surveys made in relation to the development project. Finally, we collected data from several websites and Facebook groups created by the activist groups, local news media coverage and editorials.

3.1 Data analysis

In line with the principles of the hermeneutic circle (Klein and Myers, 1999), we analysed the case over several iterations in order to challenge our own pre-understanding of the case (Butler, 1998), where understanding the political and administrative contextual issues related

to the case was our main objective. These iterations, together with the stakeholder salience (Mitchell et al, 1999) analysis, led us toward a public sphere perspective on the case.

Interviews were coded twice. An initial round was done during transcription, where interesting passages and quotes were noted. A second round coded passages relevant to stakeholder salience and the public sphere. We did not follow a formal labelling system but rather noted passages relevant to the different areas of stakeholder salience and the public sphere. The passages marked as relevant were submitted to further analysis and coded into categories representing stakeholder power/urgency/legitimacy or the public sphere. In cases of alternative interpretations, we had further discussions and eventually reached consensus on how to interpret the data. The methodological approach is represented in figure 2.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Table 2 shows an example of this process using three extracts from the interviews. The focus of this process was 1) to determine which passages in the interviews were relevant to stakeholder salience and the public sphere and 2) to interpret how the passage was relevant to our objectives.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

The case documents and workshop observations provided additional insights about the motivations of the various stakeholders. The coding of interviews and field notes from observing the meetings were the basis for our analysis of stakeholder salience. The websites and Facebook groups were coded according to the public sphere conditions presented by Dahlberg (2001) and by noting which stakeholders were present in the various discussions.

4 Case description

The urban planning process concerns a cove of 5 acres located about 1 km from the centre of a mid-sized Norwegian city (40 000 inhabitants). Over the past 30 years, a number of plans have been put forward for development of the cove. Figure 3 shows a timeline that marks the milestones of the case's progress.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

In the 1980s, the city council decided to build a new harbour in the area, but the development was halted. Between 2001 and 2006, several plans were presented and rejected. The area is very attractive for development, because it is by the sea and the last open area close to the city

centre in a city where the topography makes development difficult. While there is agreement that something should be done with the cove, there is strong disagreement between those who want housing developments and those who want to use the area as a park.

In 2007, the city council accepted plans for a residential building, but the project ignited local opposition. Several activist groups formed, and through a concentrated campaign, which included talking to politicians, writing to the local newspaper and setting up stands and organising protests, they were able to stop the plans. The activists also managed to stop a renewed plan presented in 2009. This time, the activists' campaign expanded to include Facebook groups and the Internet. The Facebook groups were especially effective in gathering support and attention, with one group having more than 2 000 members. Local media covered the Facebook group membership extensively.

In 2010, the municipality restarted the process and decided to come up with a new development plan. After being criticised for not listening to citizens, the municipality decided to run this as an inclusive process. In 2011, they arranged three workshops prior to the city administrators developing the plans.

In addition to the workshops, the city distributed an online survey to the public. Fifty-six per cent of the respondents (N=688) reporting they wanted at least half the area for a recreational park. The local newspaper distributed another survey two months later, with similar results. Both surveys were open to interpretation, which led developers and activists to argue a great deal about what was the 'true' public opinion on the matter.

Both activists and government officials have called this a sham process, claiming that the city council had no intention other than to soothe the opposition. City council members denied such charges in interviews, claiming they created the workshops and surveys in an honest attempt to be more inclusive. In March 2011, the city council voted in favour of residential

and business development on 75 per cent of the cove, and in August, the council signed a contract with the developer.

In September 2011, there was a new municipal election. Following the same strategy that led to a halt in development in previous years, the activists created a pamphlet showing how people could vote if they wanted politicians in the new city council who would re-open the case. The pamphlet was distributed in both print and digital form through the activists' website and promoted in local media and on Facebook. Although not a complete success, the activists were able once again to influence who was elected to city council.

In October 2013, the developer presented renewed plans, with a larger area set aside for the public. These plans were accepted by a massive majority in the city council.

5 Findings and analysis

Our research questions: 'What communication preferences do major stakeholders have in their efforts to influence the decisions being made, and how does this fit into ideal forms of public sphere?' were addressed through a three-step analytical approach. First, main stakeholder groups and their project interests were identified. Then, a salience analysis was conducted to identify stakeholders' salience regarding the project. Third, based on the identification of stakeholder groups, interests and saliency, we examined stakeholders' communication preferences and compared them to the salience analysis.

5.1 Stakeholder groups and interests

We identified stakeholder groups through a document listing formal stakeholders and input from the interviews. The following stakeholder groups were identified: the real estate developer, city council politicians, activists, the chief municipal officer, ordinary citizens, historical societies, the regional government heritage office, the regional government, the

environment office and various government offices with interests in the area, such as transportation and railroad authorities. The most active stakeholder groups have been politicians, the developer and the activist groups. We define activists as those individuals who are active members of one of the organisations formed to oppose development of the cove. Citizens are defined as all of the inhabitants of the municipality who do not belong to one of the other stakeholder groups.

The identification of the stakeholder groups' interests was done mainly through analysis of interviews. It was verified through analysis of Facebook groups and other online statements, newspaper editorials and media coverage of the case. Stakeholder interests are summarised in table 3, and the most central stakeholders are discussed below.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

The developer: The developer's main interest is financial gain. He stands to gain substantial income from developing the area. However, the developer is also interested in developing the city by creating jobs and building a new district that is to become an extension of the existing city centre, thereby making the city a more attractive place to live and work. By developing the cove, the developer believes he is giving something back to the city:

> The landowner is an old fisherman and did business in the cove in the past. He has a
> genuine interest in really doing something with the area, something that is good for the
> city and something he can be remembered for by later generations. (Interview,
> developer 1)

Politicians: The city council politicians believe in creating a more attractive city through development, although they disagree about the nature of development. Fulfilling the goals in their respective party programs is another important interest, but most importantly, they talk about their long-standing ambitions for positive development in the cove:

> Our main objective must be to create a stimulating and inspiring environment for our
> children, to ensure that every child born should have the possibility of an upward
> class journey. And we know the importance of the area you live in for these things . .
> . what is best for our children is our guiding light in the cove development.
> (Interview, politician3)

Activists: While there are several activist groups, their interests are more or less the same. Like the developer, they also want to create a more attractive city, but they believe that a recreational park is better suited for this purpose; hence, their main interest is in conflict with the developer's interests. They are also concerned about the value of the surrounding buildings and preserving the cultural heritage of the old wooden houses in the hills above the cove:

> We made plans for a park filled with activities: a small boat harbour, an outdoor stage,
> golf . . . We have some nice areas in the city, but there is no green zone in the centre. It
> is important to have that in a city, but we don't seem to realize that here in our city.
> (Interview, activist1)

The activists have also used arguments made by various government offices, such as ground pollution and traffic, and have worked (unsuccessfully) with the regional heritage office to get the regional government's politicians to stop the plans. They have also worked hard to convince citizens to fill out the surveys in line with the activists' interests. Even so, the survey results were inconclusive, showing that citizens were split between the buildings and the park.

Citizens: The interests of ordinary citizens were collected through two surveys conducted by the municipality and the local newspaper. In both surveys, citizens were asked how they wanted the cove to be developed, and the results were inconclusive. Few citizens want massive development. Around half the respondents wanted a mix of buildings, park and cafés, while the rest wanted less than 25 per cent buildings and the rest as a park.

Local media: Local media has played an important role in the case, acting as the main outlet for debate. In editorials, the biggest local newspaper has been outspoken in favour of a massive development with little room for green areas, while the newspaper's coverage has been more balanced:

> In our newspaper, editorial columns have been in favour of development, while the general coverage in total perhaps has been more from the point of view of the activists. (Interview, journalist1)

Regional government heritage office: The regional government is an important stakeholder in the formal hearing process, because they have the power to stop any development until their conditions are met. The regional government's heritage office, along with local historical societies, attempted to stop the development plans in order to preserve the heritage value of the area. They raised objections that modern buildings are not compatible with the heritage value of the surrounding area:

> Our opinion is that the buildings in the cove need to adhere to the visual and historical contact between the old houses in the background and the sea. And we have made some statements about that. (Interview, regional government heritage office)

Municipal administration: The chief municipal officer is an important stakeholder in any development. He is responsible for preparing the case documents and plans for the city council. Although he is supposed to be politically neutral, he has a lot of influence. His main

interest is the improvement of the city's financial stability, and he is thus in favour of heavy development, because this provides more funds for the city. The activists see him as the developer's pawn. The city's urban planners and architects also play a big role in the case, because they run the formal process based on input from city council.

5.2   Stakeholders' salience analysis

Using the model developed by Mitchell et al., (1997), we followed current practice and analysed the salience level of each stakeholder group individually, giving each a score of low, medium or high based on their power, legitimacy and urgency. We compared the salience further with the extent to which each group has been active on social media. This allowed us to see if salience level had any influence on a specific stakeholder groups' participation in social media and to analyse how social media can be considered a public sphere in cases where activist groups initiate debate. The total salience score was calculated as an average of the three saliency aspects, weighted so that no group could receive a total score of 'high' without scoring high on all three aspects. We discovered small but important differences in the salience level of the various stakeholders.

Power: We scored the various stakeholder groups in terms of their power to influence the formal decision-making process. The criterion for assigning a high score was the ability to influence both the decision-making process and its outcome. A medium score was given to those stakeholders with either the possibility to influence the process or those with legal rights pertaining to the cove. Stakeholders receiving a low score had no direct influence on either process or outcome. The city council received a high score, because it has judicial power to make decisions or to stop them. The municipal administration scored medium, because they are the ones who prepare the documents for the city council and also provide input on what they consider the best option, meaning their interpretation of the city council's will has an influence on the final decision. The activists received a low score, because they have little

formal power unless they are able to rally a sufficient number of citizens to their cause. In this particular case, the activists did not have sufficient membership numbers to influence the decision-making process directly through elections, thus they needed to convince citizens to vote for those political parties and politicians who supported the activists' views. The city council politicians stated explicitly that they were not influenced directly by the activists:

> I've been wondering . . . how many people really care about this cove? You have those few activists, a mere handful claiming to represent the majority. But when I speak to others, the trade association for instance, they say that their members are in favour of development. (Interview, politician 2)

> The way they argue and act . . . Especially [names withheld]. It makes it difficult to take them seriously even for me who agrees with them in principle. We've had this open process, and still they complain. If you don't get what you want, you've failed to convince enough people in the city council. It's as simple as that. (Interview, politician 3)

Legitimacy analyses the extent to which each stakeholder has a legitimate reason to be included in the process. The criterion for receiving a 'high' score on this aspect was if the stakeholder group was invited to present their opinion in the hearing stage of the decision-making process or otherwise seen as a legitimate stakeholder by other stakeholders. The list of stakeholders provided to us by the municipality was presented to each interview respondent, who was asked to comment on whether or not they saw the other stakeholders as legitimate participants. All of the stakeholder groups received a high score on this aspect, because they had the possibility of participating in the hearing stage of the decision-making process. However, we find the activists' legitimacy was questioned as the case progressed. Interviews with the city council politicians showed the activists have been too active and too

stubborn in their positions for too long, which has actually lowered their chances of being heard:

> None of [the activists] see that if they want to win in this case, they should support the parties who are fighting for their interests, instead of spending time criticising the ones who are not. I have not received any official support from them, despite the fact that I alone have been supporting their views in the planning committee. (Interview, politician3)

The **urgency** attribute uncovers more variation in the stakeholder groups' score than legitimacy. Urgency refers to how important the issue is for the individual stakeholder group, thus our criterion for assigning scores was the stakeholder groups' response to the question, 'How important is this case for you?', which was asked of all interview respondents. City council politicians received a high score, because politicians in the interviews and observed meetings reported that the case has dragged on for too long, taking time from other important matters, and stating that it is now time to reach a final decision. The developer and activists also received a high score, because a final decision from the city council is important for both. The developer has used substantial resources on planning and wants to start building as soon as possible to cover the losses from the planning process, while the activists know a final decision in favour of building will ruin their hopes of a park. Table 4 presents the salience analysis.

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

In summary, the city council politicians were the only stakeholder group to receive a high salience score on all three attributes. The other stakeholder groups' salience varied on

different attributes, and all of them received a medium score overall. In order to identify the important differences between the stakeholder groups, we need to look at the individual attributes for each stakeholder group. The resulting stakeholder typology is visualized in figure 4. In the figure, stakeholders are placed within the attribute circle(s) where they achieved a high score (ref. Table 4).

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

5.3 Stakeholders' saliency and communication preferences

In this section, we examine the communication media used by the different stakeholder groups and compare that to our salience analysis in order to discover if there is a connection between salience levels and media use.

City council politicians are the legal representatives of the population and thus have high salience. They are frequent users of social media in general, but while they observe the Facebook groups discussing the case, they do not participate. City council politicians write to the local newspaper instead, make their meeting minutes and other documents available online, talk face-to-face with people they meet and take part in the formal decision-making process. Some individual city council politicians use social media as a means of promoting themselves:

> Some politicians will . . . share and comment on stories from local media, post
> Facebook status updates and such things. Especially in high profile cases, some
> politicians will spend more time commenting and sharing than they do with cases that
> do not receive the same kind of attention. (Interview, politician2)

The **developer** has a medium salience score and is not visible in social media at all. The developer scores high on legitimacy and urgency and medium on power. As the owner of the land, the developer has the right to utilize it and wants to do so as quickly as possible in order to realize the values of the land. The final decision, however, still lies with the city council.

The developer reports that he has relied relied on face-to-face meetings with city council politicians and the municipal administration, the formal process as well as some attempts to communicate through traditional media. The latter was more or less abandoned after some time, because the developer felt the traditional media was not on his side.

> We have tried to get our side of the story presented through the media, same as the activists do . . . But the media tend to turn everything into scandal and negative headlines . . . Especially when you want to develop something new, there is this common perception that us builders and architects are just crooks out to make a quick buck. (Interview, developer 1)

The **activists** have a medium salience score but score low on power. They attempt to raise their power through convincing the general public that the area should not be built up, and they have a very clear strategy for how to accomplish this:

> It has been a very clear strategy on our side to use the media in order to sway public opinion in our favour . . . For example, the architect with the winning plans in 2008 was called 'Dark Architects', and, of course, we used that in our campaign, working to associate their drawings with darkness and other bad things (Interview, activist3).

They have also attempted to influence city council politicians directly through face-to-face meetings and phone calls, written complaints in the hearing stage of the decision-making process and mobilize as many as possible answer the surveys to their liking. They have also been on stands in the city centre and have held several musical concerts to gather support for

their case. Their main argument for stopping development is that 'we have public opinion on our side. Stopping the development plans is the most democratic thing to do'. As such, their strategy has been to communicate in as many channels as possible.

> New media is great, as you reach all these people with little effort. We have used the Facebook groups to collect people's phone numbers and sent SMSs to everyone about demonstrations and activities . . . It's all about reaching out and showing that we have the people of the city behind us . . . So we use every available media and have lots of stuff on our web site as well, such as the results of the surveys. (Interview, activist2)

Citizens have a medium salience score, with high power (through elections) and legitimacy (as voting citizens) but low urgency. They have communicated passively for the most part through answering the survey. A minority has also written letters to the traditional media, written supportive comments on the activists' Facebook page or commented on the online edition of the local newspaper. In 2010, 54 different people wrote to the newspaper, but only 12 people wrote three times or more. These 12 were all connected to the activists. There are varied interpretations regarding how much the ordinary citizen cares about the case. The city council politicians and government officials downplay citizen engagement, while the activists claim that citizens care deeply and are in favour of the activists' interests:

> There wasn't really a lot of interest in the survey we distributed . . . I guess you need to care quite deeply to respond. I've been asking myself this, how many people really care for the cove? We have the activists, they are relatively few, and some outsiders . . . I talked to the trade association earlier today. They say that a lot of people are very much in favour of building, but that is not something we hear about. We mostly hear about the resistance. (Interview, politician2)

They keep saying it is only a small minority of activists who care about the cove, that

we are not representative of the population. But that is completely wrong. Look at our

last list of signatures, the amount of people who signed up in just four days . . . the

survey, where results were quite conclusive . . . We don't know for sure, but we are

fairly certain that at least seventy per cent of the population agrees with us.

(Interview, activist3)

Local media communicates mainly through their own channels in the newspaper or online. They have a medium salience score. They can influence citizens through their writing but score medium on power. Legitimacy is high, as local media remains the main source of news for citizens. Urgency is low, as the media has no direct interest in the case apart from it being an interesting and ongoing story. While social media is being used to some extent, it is mainly to promote the stories written in the newspaper and not to take part in the general debate surrounding the case. Local journalists have clear ideas about how the developer and activists use the media:

The activists have been very good at arguing and marketing their views through us in

the media. The developers have not been as good at talking to us and not very present

in other forums either . . . We have been supporting the development in our editorials,

while the news coverage mostly favours the activists . . . Social media I don't think

have had much of an influence, but it has been a place where the activists could meet,

mobilize and reach out. Coordinate protests and such things. (Interview, journalist1)

Other stakeholder groups have a more passive role in the case and have not been very active in any medium. The stakeholder's media use is summarised in Table 5.

INSERT TABLE 5 HERE

6   Discussion

The analysis introduced above addresses questions concerning communication preferences among major stakeholders and reflection on the use of social media in light of the public sphere.

6.1   Salience analysis: what explains the use of social media?

While the concept of salience has been used rather extensively (e.g. Axelsson et al, 2013; Mitchell et. al., 1997; Klieschewski and Scholl, 2006; Sæbø et al, 2011), existing studies have treated the three salience attributes equally in terms of explanatory power. Our study suggests that this might not always be the case. We found urgency and, most notably, power to be the factors that contributed most to social media use. The combination of low power and high urgency has led the activists to reach out through all available channels and to seek power through influencing citizens to become activists and fight for the recreational park. With support from a sufficient number of citizens, they could have swung the vote in their favour through sheer force of numbers. However, this support failed to materialise, even though the activists claim most of the citizens are on their side.

High salience stakeholders, such as the developer, have relied more on traditional channels of communication, sought out public officials in power, and received support through editorial opinion in the local media. The analysis of the letters columns in the local newspaper shows the developer was an active participant in the beginning but chose to refrain from participating in the debate later on because he felt he was not being heard in these channels.

Our analyses of stakeholder salience and media usage suggest that stakeholders with a high degree of urgency and a low degree of power are more likely to embrace social media to promote their interests. Similarly, stakeholders with a high degree of urgency and a high degree of power are less likely to use social media and more likely to rely on traditional communication channels. These relationships are visualized in Figure 5.

INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE

6.2   *Social media as public sphere?*

While the Internet and social media have the potential to extend the public sphere (Johannessen, 2012, Papacharissi, 2002, Dahlgren, 2005), social media did not act as an ideal type of public sphere in this particular case when analysed in light of Dahlberg's (2001) criteria. The discussion spaces in social media are only partially *autonomous.* There was little discussion between the different stakeholders, and the activists were responsible for all of the online groups we identified. This was also the case in other discussion spaces and supports the findings from Bonsón et al. (2012) and Yi et al. (2013) that social media has not yet realized its potential as an arena for participation. The local newspapers' debate sections were skewed to the activists, as was participation in the workshops. However, this is due to choice on the side of the developer, because the respondent representing the landowner stated that his strategy was to address central decision-makers directly rather than try to convince the public through discussing the development online or in the local newspaper.

There was little evidence of a *rational-critical discourse* or *reflective* behaviour (Dahlberg, 2001). Instead, most arguments were one-sided statements supporting the activists' established points of view. Neither was there much evidence of a critical debate or of

discussants altering their views based on the input of others. The absence of dissenting voices in the discussion spaces can help explain this. Those opposing development created most of the posts and letters, so there was little opportunity for a critical discourse to appear.

The arguments put forward by the participants were based only partially on all of the *available information* (Dahlberg, 2001), as the developer's interests were not present at all in social media. Even though the developer's interests were known through other channels, those who participated in social media discussions chose to disregard these arguments.

Finally, we found only partial support for the criterion that everyone should have an *equal right to participate* (Dahlberg, 2001). While anyone can form a Facebook group or other social media space, our case shows that those with high urgency and little power to realise their interests are more likely to use social media. Supporters of development were not at all present or active discussants on any of the Facebook groups we examined. Neither were politicians or other important stakeholder groups with less urgency and/or more power. Hong (2013) found a relationship between trust in government and social media use, and in this case, one could argue that the absence of the developer and the politicians led to distrust and at least partially to the lack of reflective behaviour and arguments based on all relevant information.

Thus, we argue that that it is difficult to achieve an ideal type of public sphere in a case involving the combination of low power/high urgency and low urgency/high power stakeholder groups, since only the groups with low power will invest time in social media. The discussion spaces in this case should be seen instead as what Trenz and Eder (2004) call a 'mass public sphere', a public sphere based on political protest. This type of public sphere is a response to 'arcane practices of domination which exclude citizens from participation in decision-making processes' (Trenz and Eder, 2004), a description well suited to the findings

in the development case. This should have some implications for how social media is treated in the political decision-making process.

While social media was not used by all stakeholder groups, some respondents claim social media have played a big role in gaining support for the activists and as a channel for mobilising. When asked about the influence of social media on the decision-making process, most respondents, except for the activists, were negative. They claimed that social media has not had a big influence on either city council or public opinion. Respondents from all the stakeholder groups claim that face-to-face meetings and other physical modes of communication have been more important, as has the traditional media. This strengthens the argument that what we see in this case is a mass public sphere. The activists were able to change the outcome of the election to some degree, with around 400 voters changing their ballot to vote 'park-friendly' politicians into the city council after a structured campaign from the activists, thereby refuting the fears of Muhlberger (2005) that digitisation leads to fewer people caring about politics.

7   Summary and implications

In this article, we have examined citizen-initiated eParticipation in an urban planning case in a Norwegian municipality. A stakeholder salience analysis illustrates that stakeholder groups with low power and high urgency are more likely than other stakeholder groups to use social media to promote their interests. This has implications for the public sphere, as we found that high power stakeholders, like the developer, were less likely to participate since they already hold the power to influence. Consequently, social media did not provide a well-functioning public sphere in this case. Rather, it became one of many channels where the low power stakeholders attempted to reach out. These findings have some important implications.

For practitioners, our research shows that to attract high-power stakeholders to social media, we need to examine ways of motivating these groups to participate, which most likely will include some way of allowing high-power stakeholders to use their power. As it is, social media is a new channel for reaching out, competing with other existing channels such as face-to-face communication, traditional media and surveys. Until social media are made part of formal decision-making processes, stakeholders who are already powerful are unlikely to participate in social media.

We propose two different approaches to this, both of which open up new questions and issues for research. The first is *that municipalities and city councils could choose not to become active participants in social media but rather see social media as one of many places to receive informal input*. This approach means paying attention to relevant social media channels but not to act as suppliers of social media or social media spaces. If the public sector is not willing to change their decision-making processes to increase citizens' power and decrease other stakeholders' power over the decision being made, the unbalanced position continues where major stakeholders are not using social media actively and thus not contributing to the public sphere via these media. If that is the case, it does not make sense for municipalities to initiate the use of social media as a public sphere, since major stakeholders are not motivated to participate in the online discussions. By choosing a non-active listening approach, the public sector can expect to receive information from the activists, who may or may not represent public opinion in general. As reported in our case, both politicians and the developer questioned the representativeness of the activists. Hence, a passive approach, where the decision makers assess the quality of the information received, may end up reducing the public sphere by providing a mere decision-making support tool for the incumbents.

The second approach is to *make social media an integrated part of government processes and thus force high-power stakeholders to exercise their power using the social media instead of*

traditional communication channels. Social media could be included in the formal decision-making processes to develop a consultative statement from various stakeholder groups or as mandatory parts of the agenda-setting, planning and control phases of the decision-making processes. In our opinion, this could serve to trigger urgency among high-power stakeholders as well. Our analysis suggests that urgency is the determining salience attribute in this context; therefore, we propose that this could lead to an increase in (e)participation and the creation of a 'true' public sphere. As activists seem to use social media regardless of government supply, one could argue that it only makes sense for governments to facilitate the use of social media when their use is integrated in formal processes.

For research, our work provides a detailed understanding of social media use through investigation of stakeholders' salience. Our paper follows up on Federici et al.'s (2015) call for research on citizen-initiated eParticipation and the more specific call for research on the role of social media (Ferro et al., 2013; Criado et al., 2013). We do this by following Mitchell et al.'s (1997) call for investigation of the usefulness of their work on stakeholder salience and appropriateness of the salience attributes. While Mitchell et al. (1997) consider power, legitimacy and urgency to be of equal importance in assessing salience, more recent research has suggested that urgency appears to be the most important contributor to salience in an eParticipation context (Sæbø, et.al. 2011). Our findings corroborate the importance of urgency in the context of social media use but also emphasize the importance of power. In summary, we found power and urgency to be more important than legitimacy. This observation should be investigated further in other settings. Considering that one of three original salience attributes seems to be somewhat irrelevant in the context of political debate and decision-making, further studies could investigate if this attribute can be revised or replaced.

In conclusion, we have contributed to a better understanding of who participates in social media and why. Through the stakeholder salience analysis, we identified that power is the main determining factor, especially when low power is combined with high urgency. More studies are needed to investigate the contextual sensitivity of our findings, to shed further light onto the relative importance of the three attributes of the use of social media as a public sphere, and to examine if stakeholder salience may change over time if conditions in the case change. For example, the case presented in this paper shows some indication that the constant pressure and the aggressive tactics used by the activists actually led to a decline in the legitimacy attribute, as both citizens and politicians in the city council seemed to grow tired of the activists.

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