Lobbying inequality: Categorising policy interventions

While vigorous lobbying by groups within society is essential for the functioning of democracy, it is widely perceived that resource rich groups, particularly corporations, enjoy unfair advantages and influence. This perception damages public trust in the efficacy of civic participation and the legitimacy and integrity of policy making. Within this context public affairs practitioners are equally perceived as a group who primarily assist the interests of elites and hinder, rather than assist, the articulation of civic interests in democratic governance. The OECD recently described this situation as a “sharp and damaging ethical schism” that has emerged between practitioners and the public (OECD 2012). While it is difficult to imagine any system of government that does not in some way reflect hegemonic relationships that are constitutive of any society, democratic legitimacy and public trust require a belief that the rules of the influence game are fair and open. Neopluralism posits a contingent approach to influence (Lowery and Gray 2004) with studies suggesting that resource rich groups frequently fail to succeed in their lobbying campaigns, but conversely the continued growth in the number of organisations deploying public affairs and lobbying has not provided us with any confidence that there is an equality of influence or that policy outcomes will be equitable (Godwin et al 2012, Baumgartner et al 2009). Yet while empirical studies on interest group influence suggest contingency, public perceptions on the role of lobbyists suggest practitioners suffer from an absence of civic legitimacy (Davidson and Rowe 2016).

This problem intermittently leads reformers and critical scholars to assess and develop policies that might assist in addressing lobbying power imbalances, or wider inequalities in the communicative economy. The paper builds on Moloney’s (2006) call for exploring ways of intervening in the communicative economy to either subsidise or transfer resources to groups in society - who are profoundly impacted upon by legislation and policy - but historically have not had sufficient access to PR and lobbying resources to effectively provide their own information subsidy or mobilisation of affected citizens. More recently Gandy (2015) has returned to publishing in order to expand upon public policy initiatives that might balance the advantages that some groups enjoy in terms of the ability to frame issues or provide information subsidies. Situated within neopluralist and critical public relations theoretical frameworks the paper’s methodology centres on the use of documentary and policy analysis to establish and critically assess the types of regulatory measures and policy initiatives that have been proposed or enacted at the UK or EU levels. The paper is also interested in informal or voluntary initiatives that can be taken by lobbying practitioners and specialist public affairs agencies, exploring possibilities of practitioners articulating forms of collective civic responsibility. Finally the analysis will inform a final discussion of pathways to reform.

This talk introduces four waves of digital activism and cyberconflict. It tracks the rise of digital activism back to 1994, explaining how it was transformed by the events of 9/11, providing case studies all the way through to the 2011 Arab “Spring” uprisings and showcasing how digital activism entered a transformative phase of control, mainstreaming and cooptation since 2013 with the Snowden revelations. Digital activism is defined here as political participation, activities and protests organized in digital networks beyond representational politics. It refers to political conduct aiming for reform or revolution by non-state actors and new sociopolitical formations such as social movements, protest organizations, and individuals and groups from the civil society. The latter is defined as social actors outside government and corporate influence. Cyberconflict is defined as conflict in computer mediated environments and it involves an analysis of the interactions between actors engaged in digital activism to raise awareness for a specific cause, struggles against government and corporate actors, as well as conflict between governments, states and corporations. The rationale for these phases is solely based on political effects, rather than technological or developmental determinants. During my talk, I provide a brief overview of the first (1994-2001) and second phase (2001-2007) of digital activism and cyberconflict. I provide a more detailed account of specific cases of digital activism in two further phases: between 2007-2010 and 2010-2014. In the first part of my talk I argue that the mainstreaming of digital activism will render it ineffective and inconsequential in the long term. I offer my thoughts on the future of network power and resistance in relation to high-level information warfare targeting infrastructure and grids rather than information content and network connections. My thesis is that there is a constant transformation of digital activism beyond its symbolic and mobilizational qualities, as we have experienced it since 1994. Digital activism is likely to enter a phase of mainstreaming as ‘politics as usual’: an established element in the fabric of political life with no exceptional qualities, normalized and mainstreamed by governments through collaboration with corporations and the cooptation of NGOs. Cyberconflict will revolve more around high-level information warfare of attacking infrastructure, rather than just using ICTs to mobilise or as a weapon for low-level societal largely symbolic attacks. The higher level character of conflict in digital networks will intensify to the extent that digital activism and cyberconflict of the last two decades shall pale by comparison. Further, new quieter forms of digital activism, such crowdfunding for commons-oriented projects, peer production, digital fabrication/open hardware, blockchain open governance and platform cooperativism are discussed here as new sociopolitical formations in digital governance and political economy gaining momentum.