Trending forest policy ideas in social media – an explorative study on European forest policy

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Project outline

Forest governance within the European Union (EU) has been guided by a common forest strategy for the last two decades (Pülzl and Hogl, 2014). Revisions of the latest strategy from 2013 are currently discussed due to unresolved issues concerning the definitions of multifunctionality and sustainability. While formal sessions and hearings are reoccurring in the EU parliament, the discussion is also taking place outside traditional fora, appearing on social media for example under the hashtag #ForestStrategy. On these social media platforms, actors are shaping and reshaping their and others actors' policy ideas concerning the future of European forests. This project will explore the potential for analyzing European forest policy through social media inquiry.

Social media is arguably "the largest, richest and most dynamic evidence base of human behavior" (Batrinca & Treleaven, 2015, p. 90). Activities on social media platforms contribute to the co-production of knowledge, norms and public opinions (Jasanoff and Simmet, 2017). Hashtags are no different from policy ideas as they "bracket ideas, serve as instruments, convey visions and, perhaps most importantly, offer a container for others to add alternative meanings and associations" (Jeffares, 2014, p. 96). In fact, actors will "battle for control" over policy ideas by connecting statements to their preferred narratives (ibid., p. 97). Each tweet is a microblog and a story-line (Hajer, 1995), carrying meaning directed to policy (Jeffares, 2014).

Considering the high political stakes involved in the reformulation of the EU Forest Strategy we cannot afford, not to analyze the activity taking place on social media platforms. The high speed and fast turnover of information and messages on social media is the charm as well as the great challenge. The challenge of the data analysis has prompted one scholar to describe the situation as "not quantitative data, rather qualitative data on a quantitative scale" (D'Orazio, 2014). Innovative methods for analyzing the so called big-data produced by social media activity are today readily available and constantly updated, but have to our knowledge so far not been used to analyze forest policy related issues. Commonly applied methodologies and theories for policy analysis such as social network analysis and framing analysis are highly applicable and will be employed in this project.

Research aim and questions

The project aims to investigate the potential for analyzing and improve our understanding of EU forest policy through social media inquiry. The European forest strategy and related hashtags will be explored considering social networks, frames and practices. The social media platform that will be included in the study is Twitter, based on the frequent use of references to the EU forest strategy, the political focus and the high number of active users on this platform.

In pursuit of the study aim the following research questions are posed:

- Who interacts with who? How? Why does it matter?
- How are European forest policy issues framed on social media platforms?

- How are different actors using social media in relation to European forest policy issues? To what end? What are their motivations?

References

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