

Peer-Reviewed Original Article

## Impacts of Social Media on Public Policy Development in pre-Taliban Afghanistan

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**Abstract:** The impacts of media, mainly social media, have attracted greater scholarly attention. However, their effects on public policy development and the decision-making procedure of a government have not been examined so far. Thus, this study examines such effects in pre-Taliban Afghanistan before August 2021. Theories of *signal detection* and *agenda-setting* are adopted. Five variables (problem identification, media attention, perceived change, social media intensity, and relevance of social media) were conceptualized and operationalized to understand and measure the impact. Two data sets, qualitative and quantitative, were chosen on the eve of a presidential election (September 2019). For the first data set, a 63-question questionnaire was developed and piloted, and a purposive sample was chosen (N = 385). The second set contains in-depth interviews with government employees and bloggers. Findings show that social media influences public policy formulation and decision-making procedures. The results further reveal that social media are an essential vehicle for governance, have the potential to provide a networked public sphere, and bridge the communication gap between government and the public in a fragile state like Afghanistan.

**Keywords:** social media, effect of social media, public policy, agenda-setting, Facebook, Twitter, Afghanistan

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### **Acknowledgement**

This article has been made possible by the support of the programme *Media System and Public Sphere of Afghanistan* (<https://mps-afg.com/>) at Leipzig University and the Institute of International Education (IIE) Scholar Rescue Fund grant number (AFGHANISTAN /S-AF-200-21-GR-3011-).

**To cite this article:** Bahar, Hazrat (2023). Impacts of Social Media on Public Policy Development in pre-Taliban Afghanistan. *Global Media Journal – German Edition*, 13(2), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60678/gmj-de.v13i2.246>

## Introduction

In a democratic society, people's participation in governance is theoretically encouraged and promoted. Higher involvement of the public, for instance, in deliberation or public policy development could award the ruling apparatus and government a great deal of popularity and conformity (Christiano, 2018; Hansson et al., 2015). Globally, more than 4.8 billion people use social media, 60.6% of the world's population (Kepios, 2023). Research about the impacts of social media has primarily focused on the mobilization of the public in organizing political protests (Tufekci, 2017), elections (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), political participation (Ahmad et al., 2019), identity (Newsom & Lengel, 2012) and collective action (Spier, 2017). However, its impacts on a government's policy development and decision-making have not been sufficiently examined internationally, particularly not in conflict zones or fragile states like Afghanistan. This paper studies pre-Taliban Afghanistan when it still had a relatively free democratic system of government – at least on paper. At the same time, it was considered as one of the most corrupt countries (Transparency International, 2020), and remained both politically and economically a fragile state (Fund for Peace [FFP], 2023). Despite these limitations, Afghans also experienced such a democratic system for the first time when they had the power to influence decisions made by those in power.

Understanding citizens' hardships and sufferings is a prerequisite for addressing them. Likewise, public participation in public policy development, mainly in the problem identification stage and decision-making procedure, is highly encouraged and stipulated in a healthy democracy. Looking at social network sites' prevalence and growing pervasiveness, it was assumed that social media was the leading platform where people could voice and share their concerns, problems, views, and demands. Could that be translated into influence or change in policy or decision-making? This paper examines the potential impact and use of social media in Afghanistan before the takeover of the Taliban in August 2021.

## Theoretical framework and literature review

Media effects theory explains “the uses and effects of media on individual, group or society as a whole” (Valkenburg & Oliver, 2020, p. 18). Media effects are “things that occur as a result – either in part or in whole – from media influence” (Potter, 2012, p. 38). Agenda setting theory discusses how media affect the agenda of the public (and policy). The policy agenda-setting traditions study the relationship between media and policy agenda (Soroka, 2002).

Baumgartner and Jones (1993) adopted an agenda-setting approach for analyzing public and policy relations. They later came up with *signal detection theory*, which offers a structure for logically describing “decision-making in the presence of uncertainty” (Gongvatana, 2011, p. 2297). Vital decisions are to bring changes in policy.

Policy change depends on the ability of a political system to respond to those changes and how the system processes information. Likewise, attention is also vital for policy change because it changes the meaning of issues (Baumgartner et al., 2008). It is based on the information process model of Jones and Baumgartner (2005) or, more specifically, a disproportionate information process. Information needs to be interpreted in a relevant way to government policy action. It should also be prioritized; otherwise, that information may go unnoticed and unpicked. The information processing approach is “collecting, assembling, interpreting and prioritizing signal from the environment” (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, p. 8). Government policy cannot respond to each problem. The capacity of political systems, similar to human cognition, is limited; therefore, “information processing in politics is disproportionate” (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, p. 25), and governments prioritize issues through agenda juggling. Although not denying incremental policy change, their information processing model argues for what they called *punctuated equilibrium*. Adopted from biological evolution theory, the concept of punctuated equilibrium operationalized in policy development by Baumgartner & Jones (1993) shows that policy punctuates (changes suddenly), and this shift happens mainly because of the disproportionality of information processing (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005).

The concept of social media is grounded in *web 2.0 technology* that can make users generate and share data, virtually organize and participate in events, form and expand the social network, make a transaction, and cooperate in web content. Web 2.0 is a platform where end-users and software developers collaboratively use the World Wide Web to create, publish, and modify applications and content; it is the “platform for the evolution of social media” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Their very aim is participation and co-production (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009).

According to the policy process model, policy development starts with the problem identification stage. This stage involves monitoring the media by policymakers and decision-makers to detect signals – information – which are subsequently translated into identified problems (Anderson, 2011; Dye, 2013). Once an issue is recognized as a *problem*, the process proceeds to the next stage – policy agenda-setting. Of course, media is not the only source contributing to agenda-setting. Social media, in addition to traditional mass media, has been increasingly adopted and effectively utilized by government and politicians for serving various interests. For example, during the 2008 presidential election in the US, Barack Obama’s campaign team extensively used social networking sites (for more information, see Pariser, 2011; Howard et al., 2016). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that social media can also exert influence over the problem identification stage of public policy development. Yet, the architecture of social media platforms has come under criticism for creating exclusive environments, where more like-minded people congregate, ultimately fostering political polarization, reinforcing biases, and promoting homophily. Several key concepts help explain these issues, including the *filter bubble*, *echo chamber*, polarization, and information bias. The term *filter bubble* was introduced by Pariser (2011) and describes the scenario in which a website’s algorithms or filters

selectively present information tailored to users based on their previous online behaviours. The online *echo chamber* is closely related to the *filter bubble*. It is a space where like-minded individuals come together to discuss topics that can unilaterally alter their existing perspectives and reinforce homogeneity while avoiding ideas that challenge their preconceived notions and political views (Gillani et al., 2018). The socio-political consequences of this phenomenon include the spreading of fake news, disinformation, confirmation bias, and polarization (Seargeant & Tagg, 2019). These effects not only run counter to the principles of a deliberative democracy but also hinder the discourse of communicative action. In a healthy democracy, people should have the opportunity to encounter diverse and inclusive ideas and issues rather than being confined to *echo chambers* (Sunstein, 2017).

Nevertheless, acknowledging the above-mentioned potential challenges associated with social media, they may also provide an environment and space, that can help people to voice their concerns, share ideas, and participate in democracy. They may encourage political engagement and provide a platform for the marginalized grassroots communities. In some cases, social media have facilitated deliberation and public participation and these platforms can enhance the responsiveness of politicians and government officials (Eom et al., 2018). Spier (2017) and Trottier & Fuchs (2015) argue that these platforms support collective action and create communities of practice. As none of these studies deal with the situation in Afghanistan, it is relevant to look closer at the situation of social media in Afghanistan. Taking in account that Afghanistan is currently ruled by the Taliban regime, which also has an effect on the use of social media for policy development by Afghan citizens, the following section deals with the situation before August 2021.

## **Afghanistan and Social Media**

The political and media systems in Afghanistan post the collapse of Taliban rule in 2001 were unprecedented. For the first time, Afghanistan experienced a presidential democratic system where freedom of media was legally guaranteed, leading to the operation of hundreds of media outlets with notably critical coverage (Reporters without Borders [RSF], 2013; 2022). However, the lack of security, a weak economy, corruption, and political polarization remained great challenges. Besides that, the country relied significantly on external assistance, both in terms of security and economic support. In addition to that, given the chaotic presidential elections, particularly in 2014 and 2019 and their outcomes, political legitimacy also came under question. This reliance and fragility were evident after the international support was reduced following the Doha agreement between the Taliban and the USA in February 2020.

Social network sites were popular and used by the government, politicians and the public (Altai, 2017). All prominent social media platforms were freely accessible. At least until 15 August 2021, there was no restriction on using any social network site.

Bureaucrats, armed opponents of the government, and ordinary people, particularly the bloggers, could express views and even criticize those in power without any severe consequences. After sports and celebrity content, politics was the most highly discussed content on social media (Altai, 2017; Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit [GIZ], 2014). The leading platforms were Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, WeChat, and LinkedIn. Most users were youth (Altai, 2017); this study found that more than 80% were under 30. As a patriarchal society, around 82% of the social media users were male (Altai, 2017).

The use of social media was widespread among the elite and politicians. Practically all high-ranking and mid-level government officials maintained social media accounts. In addition to government representatives, prominent political parties, individual politicians, business figures, tribal leaders, and other influential individuals such as bloggers actively utilized social media platforms. Announcements and significant updates from these figures were typically first disseminated through their respective social media accounts. For instance, when President Ashraf Ghani declared a ceasefire with the Taliban in 2018, the announcement was initially posted on the official Facebook page of the presidential palace (*Arg*). Social media played a 'significant role' during the 2018 parliamentary election campaign. The candidates perceived social media as the sole communication tool enabling direct connections with their audience. They strategically utilized these platforms, among others, to rally citizens against the threats posed by the Taliban (Obaidi & Dastgeer, 2022).

However, the accessibility, reach, and affordability of social media remained limited, posing a significant constraint on the generalization of this study. As of 2021, only 4.4 million individuals were actively engaged in social media, constituting just 11.2% of the total population (39.38 million) (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2021). Nonetheless, this number was steadily on the rise. This minimal penetration of the internet might indicate inadequate communication infrastructure and a challenging economic situation, particularly with almost half of the population living below the poverty line, surviving on approximately 2056 Afghanis per month (equivalent to around one USD per day) (World Bank, 2018, p. 5).

Moreover, the low literacy rates, let alone media literacy, served as another limitation. Afghanistan registers one of the lowest literacy rates globally, standing at 43% (UNESCO, 2021, p. 2). Data for this study was collected in four specific zones and Kabul – representing each geographical region of the country.

Afghanistan's strategic political and geographical position is “a curse and blessing” (Misdaq, 2006, p. 166) at the same time. For the past 150 years, external powers have meddled in its internal affairs and it was invaded by Great Britain in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, later by the Soviet Union, and more recently by NATO. The country sustained significant losses and hardship but still remained on the political agenda of the great and regional powers. Against this backdrop, given the strategic geopolitical location and socio-cultural condition of Afghanistan, did social media have



the potential to influence public policy and decisions of those in power? If so, how did social media impact the government's public policy development and decision-making procedures? Did the impact differ in central and provincial governments? And last, what role did social network sites play in the interaction between the government and the public? Answering these questions, we measure perceptions of social media users.

## Methods

The quantitative part is intended to answer the question if social media impacted public policy, whereas the qualitative approach seeks to understand how the impact happened. For conducting quantitative analysis, multiple linear regression (MLR) analysis was chosen. The MLR adopted in this research has been used in other studies that investigate the impact and influence of media on diverse aspects (Dolan et al., 2019; Jin et al., 2019). Regarding the qualitative data, a thematic analysis was chosen. This method aligns with an interpretive paradigm and is particularly useful for identifying and examining themes and discourse, especially when dealing with qualitative data, such as insights derived from in-depth interviews.

The study's target population includes three categories: government officials, opinion leaders or bloggers, and social media users. Government officials at the provincial level encompassed the governors, while in the capital, they included staff members of the presidential palace (*Arg*), including the *National Security Council*, which was the highest decision-making body after the *Arg*. Opinion leaders are individuals with a minimum of 20,000 followers on one of the social media networking sites.

To collect data, I have used SurveyMonkey tools, a practical option that “can be employed as an assessment tool” (Symonds, 2011, p. 436).

$$Sample\ size = \frac{z^2 \times p(1-p)}{e^2 + \left(\frac{z^2 \times p(1-p)}{e^2 N}\right)}$$
 where N = population size; e = Margin of error (percentage in decimal form); z = z-score, for 95% confidence level, z = 1.65. With (±5) precision level and (95%) confidence level. A sample size of 385 was calculated, and data was collected in July, August, and September 2019. Efforts were made to ensure a diverse sample of Afghanistan's multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic society, considering factors such as gender, geographical location, different ethnicities and languages. To have people from different areas, the country was divided into five regions to represent each geographical region in this sample: north (Balkh), south (Khost), east (Nangarhar), west (Herat), and the capital Kabul. On the eve of the presidential election in 2019, security was deteriorating and traveling to different cities was risky. Therefore, some research interviews had to be conducted over the phone or online and some had to be planned in regions with less security risk. Approximately 20% of participants in the sample are female, although in the total population, the number of women is nearly equal to that of men (49 vs. 51) (National Statistics and Information Authority [NSIA], 2019, p. 3). The smaller percentage of

women participants should be understood in the context of a very conservative patriarchal society where tribal and spiritual leaders, and religious scholars continued to exercise great leverage and power (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Misdaq, 1990). Active participation of women in public life was not overly encouraged, and the education of girls was still lower than that of boys. Some women preferred to have their face fully veiled (in *Burka*) in public, though such mindsets varied in urban areas and in different provinces. On average, there were 76 participants from each zone in the sample size.

For the qualitative data analysis, a thematic analysis approach was selected. While multiple themes were identified, only those deemed relevant and valuable for interpreting the studies' quantitative findings and addressing the research questions were selectively chosen. Interviews with open-ended questions were conducted with government officials and opinion leaders, with one representative from each zone and two from the capital. The interviews were conducted in local languages, later translated into English, and each interview lasted between 25 and 40 minutes. To ensure anonymity, all interviewees' identities were protected. Codes were established based on the keywords in the interviewees' responses, which also helped to identify the relevant themes.

### ***Operationalization of variables***

Since abstract concepts are neither directly observable nor easy to measure, an operationalization is required, which is a “process of clarifying abstract concepts and translating them into specific, [and] observable measures [...]” (De Vaus, 2001, p. 24). A similar difficulty exists in measuring and understanding the perceived impacts of social media on public policy when a single variable may be an unsuitable measurement unit. Consequently, I have combined multiple variables, which then can be used as a single variable. This combination of variables is not uncommon in communication research as seen in Leticia Bode's approach while researching online social networking and political behaviour (Bode, 2012).

### ***Media attention***

Media significantly influences public attention, with the extent of this influence determined by factors such as time, space, type of content, salience, and tone within media coverage. Based on the information processing approach, signal detection theory argues that public policymakers navigate intricate interactions through information signals (Jones & Wolfe, 2010). Jones & Wolfe (2010) contend that media coverage amplifies the salience of issues by transmitting them as signals, and “the stronger the signal, the clearer and more urgent the message, the more likely government will respond, and the larger the response” (p. 38). Using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree), five questions were developed and asked to understand how social media users perceive whether the government pays any attention to social media. These questions were aimed to assess whether



the central government acknowledges the information on social media while formulating policies. The participants' responses were combined by executing the items with an overall mean (2.732) and Cronbach's Alpha based on standardized items 0.793.

### *Social media intensity*

This variable is meant to assess the level of social media usage among users. Measuring intensity has been frequently applied across social media platforms. Ellison et al. (2007) introduced Facebook intensity (FBI) in 2007, and the same measurement has been used for evaluating other platforms such as WeChat and Twitter (Bowman & Clark-Gordon, 2019). The intensity is measured by daily time, monthly monetary expenditure, and the number of friends or followers within the users' network. Before analyzing the impact of social media on public policy development and decision-making procedures, it is highly relevant to ascertain the extent of social media utilization by the Afghan population. The average individual spends 151 minutes on social media daily (Dixon, 2023). For producing intensity as a single variable, three aspects - number of friends, time, and money spent on social media - were collectively examined, resulting in a mean score of 2.587 and Cronbach's Alpha based on standardized items of 0.479.

### *Perceived change*

Measuring media influence is a dynamic process with "no single formula or metric for understanding [media] impact" (Harmony Institute, 2013); that is why multiple variables are developed in communication research (see, for example Graham & Mazer, 2019). Since this study tries to see and measure perceived impacts, the influence must be subjective. The Q methodology is widely used for measuring perception and subjective viewpoints in research in psychology and communication (Napoli, 2014) as it provides "a foundation for the systematic study of subjectivity, a person's viewpoint, opinion, beliefs, attitude, and the like" (Brown, 1993; cited in van Exel & de Graaf, 2005, p.1). This study also applied the Q methodology and used a five-point Likert scale asking participants whether they believed or not that their posts on social media influences the government's decision-making and policy development procedure on central levels, whether the provincial government (governor) acts following their writings on SNSs, and whether their online activism plays any role in appointing or dismissing the governor. It is worth noting that in line with the central government, the governor is selected and dismissed by the president. The items mentioned were examined and combined with a mean (2.596) and Cronbach's Alpha based on standardized items 0.825.

### *Problem identification*

In the policy processing model, problem identification is the first stage. It is when issues and situations are identified and defined as 'problems' and then placed on the

policy agenda. Media helps the government in problem identification for policy (Dye, 2013; Fawzi, 2018; Feezell, 2018). People tend to “translate ‘situations’ into ‘problems’ when they think this situation is relevant to their well-being” (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, p.16). According to the information processing model, the more prominent the information, the greater its chance of detection for policy and decision (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). Fawzi (2018) discovered that media has the most significant influence on the problem identification stage compared to other policy processing models. To assess whether the actions of social media users impact this stage of policy development, participants were asked to select the most appropriate platform for sharing their concerns from options including radio, social media, television, newspapers, or members of parliament. They were also asked if policymakers addressed the topics they discussed on social media. A five-point Likert scale was used for the last part. The participants’ responses were aggregated, resulting in a mean score of 2.934 and Cronbach's Alpha based on standardized items 0.816.

### *Relevance of social media*

The relevance here is the importance and usefulness of social media (Whiting & Williams, 2013). People use media to gratify their needs (Lariscy et al., 2011). Participants were asked to assess the significance of social media for the government’s policy development and decision-making processes. They were also asked about their preferred platform for obtaining news, the extent to which they can criticize others on social networking sites, the role of social media in shaping public opinion; whether they express support or criticism of the provincial government on social media; and the level of freedom they feel when writing and critiquing. A five-point Likert scale was employed to gauge their responses. In essence, this part tries to gauge the general perception of social media users regarding the essential role of social media in policy development and government decision-making. Participants’ responses were aggregated, yielding an average score of 2.344 and Cronbach's Alpha based on standardized items 0.571.

## **Results**

A total of 385 respondents were included in the study and 80.8 percent were male and 19.2 percent female. Nearly all of them were literate, with the majority holding a bachelor’s degree (72.5%), followed by high school graduates (15.1%), while 10.4% had a master’s degree, and 0.3% had a Ph.D., whereas 1 percent marked *other* without specifying it. There were 39.8% government employees, 11.9% non-governmental organizations (NGOs), 24.2% private businesses, 16.2% students, 2.8% did not have a job, and 5.1% marked others without naming it. All the participants were using social media. The primary social media platform used was Facebook, with 95.5% of respondents having an account. This was followed by 42.9% for YouTube, 40.5% Twitter (now X), 37.1% for Instagram, 12.5% for WeChat, and 7.1% for LinkedIn.

Users spent around 500 Afghani (US\$ 6.4) per month on internet packages for social media and devoted more than three hours per day on social media activities. Obtaining news was the leading reason for using social media (71.7%), followed by reforming society and government (66.8%). More than half of the participants (50.6%) felt comfortable criticizing others, and 66% responded that they express their views without concerns and threats. Furthermore, over 70 percent of the participants considered social media to be of significant importance, believing that the government should pay attention to it when developing public policies and addressing public issues.

Aligned with the research questions, the aim was to explore the impact of social media influences on the development of public policy and decision-making processes, examining if and how it exerts influence. This influence is looked on at three different levels: central government, the provincial government, and in general, i.e. the national level.

### ***Impact of social media on policy and decisions of central government***

**Table 1: Estimation results**

	Perceived Public Policy of Central Gov.	Perceived Public Pol- icy of Provincial Gov.	Perceived Public Pol- icy in General
Constant	0.425* (0.198)	0.434** (0.203)	0.417** (0.167)
Problem Identifica- tion	-0.197** (0.054)	-0.236*** (0.056)	-0.206*** (0.046)
Social Media Inten- sity	0.26 (0.23)	0.007 (0.024)	0.018 (0.020)
Perceived Change	0.741*** (0.065)	0.770*** (0.067)	0.765*** (0.055)
Media Attention	0.209*** (0.055)	0.200*** (0.056)	0.202*** (0.046)
Relevance of social media	0.014 (0.057)	0.059 (0.059)	0.033 (0.048)
Prob > F	83.238***	84.778***	121.624***
R-squared	0.523	0.529	0.616
Adj. R-squared	0.517	0.522	0.611
Observations	385	385	385

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

The analysis showed that social media impacted public policy and decisions of the government. The influence is slightly higher on the provincial level than the central. On the central government level, the result indicated (Table 1) that the five variables or predictors collectively account for 51.7% of the variance ( $r^2$ ) or change in public policy development due to social media as perceived by the users. The result as a whole is statistically significant with ( $F(5, 379) = 83.238, p < 0.01$ ). Almost similar result (52.2%) and statistical significance ( $F(5, 378) = 84.778, p < 0.001$ ) were given for the provincial level as well. In case of general or combined (provincial and central), a relatively higher influence was noticed (61.1%). Looking at the unique individual contribution of the independent variables (the predictors) in general, the result reveals that intensity, attention, perceived change, and relevance positively predict social media's perceived impact over public policy development and decision-making procedures without considering the central and provincial government. Among the predictors, perceived change is the most leading indicator ( $\beta = .765$ ), whereas the social media intensity is the least influential factor ( $\beta = .018$ ), and it is not statistically significant ( $p > .001$ ) as well.

### ***Results of qualitative analysis***

Throughout the qualitative data analysis, various sub-themes were identified. They were then categorized into four broader themes: a) social media as a means of communication; b) its role in policy development and decision-making; c) social media: opportunity and challenge; and d) misuse of social media.

Social media bridges the communication gap, reducing and even eliminating many communication barriers (Graham & Avery, 2013). Similarly, in Afghanistan, both the government and the citizens use social media to connect with each other. The officials actively manage social media accounts, providing multiple examples where they received issues and problems from ordinary people; these issues were then followed up on. In many cases, feedback was shared with relevant individuals through social media. Opinion leaders unanimously agree that social media is one of the suitable means of communication not only for reaching out to the government but also among ordinary people. Similarly, governments in other countries have also utilized the same channel to communicate with citizens or voters and improve services (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013).

Social media exerts a partial influence on government policies and decisions. The extent of this impact and the role of social media is perceived differently by officials and opinion leaders. While most government officials asserted that social media significantly shaped policy development and decision-making procedures, the opinion leaders, while not denying its role, claim that the government tends to disregard trends that opposed the official narrative or did not align with their interests. Countering this argument, an official confirmed that social media had a significant and direct influence. These officials believed that critical comments were essential for bringing improvement and reforms: "Once I realize that an account is not fake, I

prioritize critical voices and heed more attention to what they write,” said an official (personal communication, September 28, 2019). This increased attention was also confirmed by critical bloggers.

Social media is a double-edged sword. It provides opportunities and by monitoring the platforms, policymakers can get real-time feedback. The officials utilized social media to build a relationship with local people, which is an invaluable attribute of social media (Graham & Avery, 2013). They also used them for routine management and governance. “Social media plays a fifty percent role in my daily governance-related activities; their role was vital in reforming local security forces,” a governor said (personal communication, September 28, 2019). However, online platforms are also fraught with challenges. The government officials observed trends and engagements manually and they did not use algorithm-driven mechanism. Since the government did not have enough human resources and technology-driven mechanisms, this may increase the chance of echo chambers, filter bubbles, polarization, and information bias. It is also possible that policymakers may not notice the views and concerns of a significant amount of people. Besides that, engagement and activism on SNSs were also driven by personal interests. Powerful officials had the resources to dictate and promote politically motivated personal, rather than government or national, interests.

Reporting and trolling were not uncommon features on Afghan social media. Afghanistan had relatively good press freedom in the region (Reporters without Borders [RSF], 2013). However, social media were misused; online bloggers and government officials were targeted, trolled and insulted. Government officials, non-state actors, and armed opponents of the government reported accounts of their critics. “My Facebook page had 30,000 *likes* but was reported and removed,” said a blogger (personal communication, Sep 11, 2019); another page was suspended. When many users reported an account, the platform suspended or removed it. Government officials were often targeted by extensive campaigns, occasionally involving propaganda, which led to some being demoted or dismissed by the central government. The governors argue that while the campaigners were sincere, their actions were politically driven. Opinion leaders were also threatened and harassed. An official said: “Government, in principle, does not permit such malicious activities; however, we [the government] do identify people who undermine national interest and promote vice; we try to sit and talk with them.” (personal communication, Sep 27, 2019) Threats and fear were also perceived in our questionnaires; three out of five reported their fear, and about half the respondents feared the armed opponents of the government mainly the Taliban and ISIS.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Based on the findings, social media impacted public policy development and the decision-making procedure of the government in Afghanistan before 2021. The result

showed a promising impact (adjusted  $r$  square = .611). It means that social media can account for 61 percent of the variance in public policy. Effects were also evident from the findings of thematic analysis; both the officials and bloggers agreed and accepted the impact; however, the former exaggerated the degree of such influence. The problem identification stage of public policy development was not positively impacted; however, it is statistically significant, as shown in the findings. This result is in contrast to previous research on mass media's influence across the various stages of the political process. Fawzi has combined the first two stages (problem identification and agenda-setting) into one (agenda-setting) and asked various categories of people (politicians, administration officers, associations, scientists, and journalists) if media impact the agenda-setting stage of public policy development; she concluded that "the [news] media are perceived as very influential" (Fawzi, 2018, p. 1142; see also Anderson, 2011). The impact of media on agenda-setting is pervasive (Wolfe et al., 2013), and mass media are "active in shaping public policy ... and decisions of policymakers" (Ali & Puppis, 2018, p. 26). The presumed negative impact of social media on the initial stages of policy development can be understood in two ways. The first one is that since policy development is a lengthy process and human memories fade away over time (Winter, 2008), it would not be easy for a layperson to keep track of what they had posted online and whether their writings have been incorporated in policy for a longer time. The other possible interpretation is social media have been, at least so far, less influential compared to more traditional mass media regarding their impacts on policy development.

### ***Social media as networked public sphere***

More than 66 percent of the polled social media users could express views and criticize anyone online. Nevertheless, they feared reprisal mainly from armed opponents (50%), illegal groups (31%), and the government (22%). The result is interesting given the ongoing conflict (in 2019) as Afghanistan was one of the deadliest countries for journalists and bloggers (Tolo News, 2020). It can solidify the broader argument that an alternative or networked public sphere – as a virtual and alternative space that relies on networked communication for practicing and organizing mobilization, public discourse, and political debate along with traditional media (Benkler, 2006) – had been in the making (for details about the networked public sphere, see Benkler et al., 2015; Howard et al., 2016) which could have had the potential to influence public debate and policy development (Çela, 2015). In a working democratic society, expressing oneself on a political matter is one of the conditions and rights put forward by Dahl (1983, pp. 10-11).

### ***Social media as an essential vehicle for governance***

Based on the thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews with bloggers and government employees, social media used to be one of the leading communication channels in Afghanistan. Officials and citizens rigorously have used online platforms for communication and dissemination of information. A similar understanding and



practice exist in other countries. Eom et al. (2018) investigated the X-use (formerly Twitter) by the Seoul mayor and concluded that social media plays the most crucial role as bridging a gap between citizens and local government. Having limited and inadequate infrastructure (patchy power grid and weak transmission signal) of traditional media (television and newspaper), Afghanistan used to have strong traditional means of communication such as mosque, village council and *jirga* (Rawan, 2002). However, with the advancement in communication technology mainly in new and social media, barriers of communication have been reduced, although the new media is widely or exclusively reserved for the youth, the largest segment of the country's population – 63% of the population is aged under 25 (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], n.d.).

Although social media was one of the essential channels of communication, their impact, primarily on the government's decision-making and policy development body, varied. Bloggers said that the government have used social media selectively. In other words, officials manipulated social network sites to control public opinion and distract the public from failures and other essential issues. These bloggers argued that a genuine and grassroots voice and the problems of ordinary citizens were ignored and even suppressed. This was in stark contrast to the official narrative. Almost all high and semi-high-ranking officials said they were in sheer responsive mode. According to this view, the government followed, but did not lead, nor dominate and was not able to manipulate the general trend generated and led by social media users and was incorporated both in the decision and public policy. It seemed both parties exaggerated. The quantitative analysis results confirmed tangible changes, though, in the government's decision and action, as the identification stage of policy was negatively correlated with social media users' perceptions, which means social media were not very influential when it came to public policy development.

Overall, the perceived impacts of social media on public policy and decisions were confirmed. In other words, people and government officials believed that what internet users wrote and advocated on social network sites had influenced public policy development and decision-making procedures in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, examining objective impacts can make it clear whether such perceived changes can be translated into tangible changes in policy and government decisions in a fragile state. This is not possible in the case of Afghanistan because the political regime changed in 2021.

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