Assessing the implications of online mass media for citizens’ evaluations of government

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ABSTRACT
When assessing the potential of information and communications technology (ICT) to improve relationships between citizens and their government, public management research tends to focus on government applications of ICT and neglects implications resulting from private actors use of ICT. Given the rapid growth in private online mass media outlets over the past decade, this negligence is problematic because it biases our understanding of the implications of ICTs for citizens’ relationship with government. This paper discusses how the proliferation of online mass media outlets may influence citizens’ evaluations of their government. In doing, two key points are distilled. First, as the number of mass media outlets increase online, citizens will tend to access information that reaffirms their expectations of government. Second, as citizens’ access a narrower range of content that reinforces their expectations of government, frequency of access may play a more pronounced role in explaining variation in citizens’ evaluations of government. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications.

1. Introduction
Public management research tends to focus on evaluating the implications of information and communications technology (ICT) from a government centric standpoint. This means that assessments of technology emphasize understanding ways that public organizations can deploy ICTs to directly or indirectly forge stronger relationships with the citizens they serve (Ho 2002). Such research has offered valuable insight into how governments can use ICTs to facilitate a range of positive outcomes, ranging from increased efficiency of public service delivery (Moon 2002), to improved perceptions of legitimacy (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2015), to enhanced citizen satisfaction (Welch, Hinnant, and Moon 2005). All told, the sum of research in this area has
played an important role in helping scholars and practitioners alike better understand the ways governments can use technology to improve relationships with citizens.

However, the emphasis placed upon government centric applications of ICT has come at the expense of developing a broader understanding of the implications of ICTs for relationships between citizens and the public organizations that serve them. Indeed, today a range of actors from businesses to citizens to nonprofit organizations are using the Internet to spread information about government and promote agendas via online mass media outlets, such as blogs, online newspapers or social media. However, there have been few attempts to gauge the implications of these developments, especially for the practice of public management. This lack of attention is problematic given that today most citizens rely on online mass media outlets for information about their government’s performance. Further, current events offer compelling evidence to suggest that the evolution of online mass media is anything but irrelevant to citizens’ evaluations of government, with discussions of “fake news,” “alternative facts,” “the deep state,” and growing political polarization rampant. Against this backdrop, it is helpful for the community of public management researchers and practitioners to complement the existing emphasis on government applications of technology with assessments of how the use of ICTs, and in particular online mass media by private parties also relate to citizens’ evaluations of government.

This article has three objectives. The first is to provide a discussion of the relationship between mass media and the practice of public management, and overview how this relationship may change as a result of the growing prominence of online mass media. The second is to review public management research that explains the way citizens evaluate their government. Here, I review evidence that ties citizens’ expectations of public sector performance to their levels of satisfaction with public services and trust in government. The third is to propose ways in which the proliferation of online mass media outlets may impact the way citizens evaluate their public sector. Cumulatively, the overarching goal of this article is to reflect on the important relationship between mass media and government performance, and on the challenges confronting this relationship that result from the proliferation of online mass media outlets.

2. Why the mass media matters to public management practice

The relevance of mass media for public management is primarily derived from the role it plays in disseminating information about government performance to the public. Because of its role in informing the public, mass media can shape the performance of government, as well as citizens’ perceptions of government performance (Porumbescu 2017).

With respect to the implications of mass media for government performance, perhaps one of the most well-known illustrations of this point is Amartya Sen’s (1997, 34) claim that, “in the terrible history of famines of the world, no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press.” Sen reasons that this is because in democracies, a free press strengthens
accountability mechanisms, thereby incentivizing government to proactively engage in planning to prevent famines. Similarly, research by Strömberg (2004) indicates that during the New Deal Relief Program, launched by the Roosevelt Administration in the United States, counties with higher numbers of radio listeners also happened to receive more funds from this relief program. Here, the idea is that public institutions are incentivized to be more responsive when they know that they are being monitored and believe that this information will be disseminated to the public and factor into the public’s evaluation of government performance (Porumbescu and Im 2015).

In this way, the power of the mass media is not entirely derived from its ability to monitor government, but also from its role in interpreting and communicating government performance to the public (Fergusson 2014). Indeed, for much of the public, the mass media constitutes a primary channel through which they learn about the actions of their government. This means that the interpretation of government performance imparted upon citizens by mass media outlets can figure prominently into their evaluations of government.

Because of the important role it plays in informing citizens and framing citizen evaluations of public organizations, governments have for some time worked to shape the content and framing of information that mass media outlets disseminate to the public (Besley and Prat 2006). This may be done by biasing the flow of information to the public so as to encourage citizens to evaluate government more positively than they might otherwise be inclined to and, in turn, stymy accountability (Djankov et al. 2003). Given the implications of such threats to neutrality and objectivity, efforts to safeguard the media from government influence are longstanding – take for example the first Amendment to the United States Constitution, which intends to protect the freedom of the press.

However, while in the past, government influence over mass media has been a major threat to the public’s ability to access objective information about their government, today attention is shifting towards a different concern – growing competition among media outlets, which has been fueled by the spread of the Internet. Indeed, since the 1990s, there has been a rapid expansion in the number of media outlets available to the public. This expansion corresponds with the growing availability of the Internet (Morris and Ogan 1996). With the rapid expansion of media outlets, competition for readers has grown, leading outlets, and in particular newer outlets to tailor information to “niche markets” of readers (Im et al. 2014). Elsewhere in the literature, this is referred to as the “market logic” of mass media, whereby mass media outlets “assess what people want and satisfy those needs to maximize profits” (Prior 2006). The growing market logic of mass media can bias citizens’ exposure to information about their government in two interrelated ways.

First in a context of growing competition among media outlets, particularly for newer, primarily online media outlets, presenting objective and comprehensive assessments of government is not sufficient to stay in business (Jeon and Nasr 2016). Rather, to stay in business these actors must interpret content in ways that appeal to the market niche they target (Tandoc 2014). For example, online outlets targeting extreme conservatives will spin the news to appeal to conservative readers, whereas extreme left-wing outlets will do the same thereby limiting citizens’ access to objective
government information. Put differently, perceptions of demand drive the supply of the news. As a consequence of this information environment, citizens will encounter narrower, and more partisan assessments of what their government is doing (Haselmayer, Wagner, and Meyer 2017).

Second, heightened competition among media outlets incentivizes sensationalized coverage of government. This is because stories depicting government doing its job well (e.g., providing safe drinking water, lowering crime rates, or improving education outcomes) are not as attention grabbing for readers as stories communicating scandal and conflict (Gordon 2000). As a result, the sustainability of an online media outlet, to a large extent, will trace back to its ability to convince readers it has identified the next big scandal (Baum 2002). In this sense, greater competition among media outlets for readers engenders the promulgation of “infotainment” – attempts to spin the news to make it more entertaining to potential readers (Prior 2005). This emphasis on infotainment means citizens are exposed to less objective information about government performance, thereby (further) biasing their evaluation of government (Andersen et al. 2016).

3. How does media use shape citizens’ evaluations of public sector performance?

While much has been written about how structural shifts in the (online) mass media markets impact citizens’ evaluations of government, the cognitive processes responsible for translating information gleaned from mass media into individual evaluations of government performance are complex. This is because citizens’ performance evaluations, such as their levels of satisfaction with the provision of public services or trust in government, in addition to being affected by performance itself, result from a confluence of underlying dispositional biases pertaining to the organization (Kampen, De Walle, and Bouckaert 2006), citizen (Van Ryzin, Muzzio, and Immewahr 2004), and the performance information itself (Olsen 2015).

Despite this complexity, one framework, the expectancy disconfirmation model (EDM), has proven especially useful in explaining citizens’ evaluations of government performance (Grimmelikhuijsen and Porumbescu 2017). At the core of EDM are citizen expectations, which can be understood as “judgments of what individuals or groups think either will or should happen under particular circumstances” (James 2007, 109). In essence, performance expectations constitute a manifestation of dispositional biases. A central assertion of the EDM is that citizens’ performance expectations, as a dispositional bias, establish a basis from which we evaluate the performance public sector institutions (Van Ryzin 2006). When perceptions of performance are higher than our expectations, a situation referred to as positive disconfirmation, we tend to evaluate performance more positively, and when our perceptions of performance are lower than our expectations, referred to as negative disconfirmation, we tend to evaluate performance more negatively. In this sense, we implicitly weigh new information discussing government performance against our existing expectations of government in evaluating how well government has performed. The key point here is that our evaluations of performance hinge upon our
expectations of government and not uniquely the performance information we are exposed to: for a fixed level of performance, those who expect more from government will be more negative in their evaluations of government performance than those who expect less from government.

4. What does the online mass media mean for citizens’ evaluations of the public sector?

A key implication of the EDM is that, to accurately tie structural shifts in the online mass media market to citizens’ evaluations of government performance, we must account for citizens’ underlying expectations of government performance.

In terms of information citizens are exposed to when using online mass media, much attention has been paid to content. Specifically, online mass media has contributed to rapidly diversifying the content citizens have access to online (Vaccari 2013). From a normative perspective, this diversification of information is a good thing, as it speaks to a free flow of information to the public. However, from an applied perspective, studies have shown that rather than consuming a wider spectrum of information about government, citizens tend to select into streams of online content that closely match and reinforce their extant expectations of government (Stroud 2008). As a result, this diversification of information, coupled with citizens’ tendency to choose information that reaffirms their worldview, results in citizens being exposed to narrower coverage of government issues (Bolsen and Shapiro 2018). This biased exposure to government information, when coupled with the fact that the Internet makes it easier for citizens to frequently access content that affirms their expectations of government, lays the foundation for more polarized evaluations of government – the more frequently individuals are exposed to information confirming their expectations of government, the more polarized their views will become. Recent research, drawing on the EDM, offers support for these points, demonstrating that among those who accessed online mass media most frequently, the negative relationship between expectations of government and evaluations of government performance, both in terms of levels of satisfaction and trust in government, was strongest (Porumbescu 2017). Put differently, the results offered evidence of a reinforcement effect attributable to the frequency of mass media use.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The overarching goal of this study was to discuss the implications of online mass media for citizens’ relationships with their government. In addressing this goal, two key points are distilled. First, with the expansion of online mass media outlets, citizens now have access to a vast and diverse body of information explaining government performance. Given the diversity of content available online, citizens appear to be selecting into streams of coverage that reaffirm their expectations of government performance. In this sense, the growing diversity of information citizens have access to online may limit, as opposed to expand, their exposure to content. Second, by making it easier for individuals to access information that reaffirms their expectations
of government and allowing them to access this information more frequently, greater use of online mass media to learn about government can contribute to more polarized evaluations of government performance.

Historically, governments have been confronted by the challenge of insulating mass media outlets from the influence of various government actors in order to ensure the unrestricted flow of information to the public - such safeguards have been critical to advancing effective democratic governance. However, the structural changes discussed in this paper, that result from the emergence and expansion of online mass media outlets, signal a new generation of challenges governments must confront to protect the role mass media plays in advancing the quality of democratic governance. With this in mind, this paper concludes by outlining two implications for practice.

The first implication pertains to the relationship between public management and mass media. For decades a steady stream of research has pointed to the presence of a “media-malaise,” suggesting that exposure to mass media’s coverage of government negatively impacts citizen attitudes toward politics and their political participation (Newton 1999). Advances in ICT and the growth of online mass media are often predicted to stimulate even more critical views of the government. Taken together, these arguments seem to square with data regarding citizens’ trust in government – as most polls indicate, there has been a steady decline in levels in trust in government across a number of nations (Kettl 2017). However, this article reasons that the implications of online mass media for citizens’ evaluations of their government, and public sector in particular, are much more nuanced, shaped by extant dispositions (expectations) toward government. In this case, assessing the implications of online mass media very much depends upon the segment of the population one is talking about: While online mass media use may lead to more negative evaluations of government among those who tend to be negatively predisposed toward government, for those who are positively predisposed toward government, exposure to online mass media may actually improve perceptions of government. Therefore, efforts to ensure that the mass media fulfill its function as a means of engendering a more informed citizenry and promoting good governance in the age of the Internet must acknowledge that the shape of such efforts will need to vary across different segments of the population.

Relatedly, the second implication of this study pertains to the need to better understand factors that drive citizens’ expectations of government and lead them to select into certain streams of online mass media content. While the effects of online mass media markets on the way citizens evaluate government often attracts a great deal of discussion, such effects may be symptoms of more fundamental social cleavages related to factors such as class, religion, race, or education (Kennedy and Prat 2017). Accordingly, understanding how various antecedents of socio-economic inequality mold citizens’ access to information about government constitutes an important first step toward eliminating informational divides.

This study has discussed how online mass media is shaping the way citizens evaluate the performance of their government. In doing so, frameworks for evaluating such effects were proposed and key implications derived. At the same time, however, a final point that bears mentioning is that the discussion provided here might not be
equally relevant across all policy domains and levels of government. Specifically, given that we focus on online mass media, the ideas outlined here are likely to be the most relevant to policy areas and levels of government that citizens rarely directly encounter, yet consistently attract media attention – for example policies that are administered by federal or central governments. This is because for these policy areas, information gleaned from personal experience will be limited, meaning that information afforded to citizens by the mass media will constitute the basis for their evaluations of government in this particular domain.

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