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Policy Ideas and Hashtag Politics

Hashtag politics is the practice of naming policy ideas, thereby giving them a life and, ultimately, a death. Here are three British examples of hashtag politics:

1. In February 2001, Birmingham City Council adopted ‘Flourishing Neighbourhoods’ as a strategic priority. During the 12 months of 2002, over 80 different organisations and initiatives aligned with Flourishing Neighbourhoods. In October 2004, questions were asked in the council chamber about why Flourishing Neighbourhoods had been ‘scapped’.

2. In April 2009, the British Government announced an initiative called Total Place, designed to examine public spending and local leadership. In February 2010, Sir Michael Bichard published his report on the 13 official pilot projects and related activity across the country. In December 2011, the Coalition Government were said to have ‘torn up Labour’s Total Place programme’.

3. In November 2009, soon-to-be Prime Minister David Cameron stated his desire for a ‘Big Society’. In UK broadsheet newspapers, 33 articles mentioned the phrase, its merit and related activities. During the 12 months of 2010 this rose to 1,708, growing to 2,293 in 2011 and reducing to 1,377 in 2012 and 680 in 2013. In April 2012, the Daily Telegraph suggested the policy idea was ‘dead’.

This book is about the practice of creating and discussing policy ideas: those purposive, often branded initiatives of policy-makers, that, in the space of less than a thousand days are coined, fostered, launched, discussed, written about, adopted, critiqued, subverted, derided, ignored, forgotten and replaced. Policy ideas are policy instruments that express
deeper ideas, an imagined future couched in a unique, memorable, searchable, branded identity. Despite their taken-for-granted position in policy-making, they are largely overlooked, in contrast to broader political ideas such as ‘democracy’ or ‘neoliberalism’. They are, by some, deemed too narrow to be interesting (Berman, 2009) their visions nebulous, with claims of novelty dismissed as old wine in new bottles; to many they are much-hyped brands that are too easily tarnished. As such, policy actors and researchers ignore them. This book argues that not only are policy ideas worth researching, but that the increasing speed and growing volume of discussion surrounding policy ideas through social media presents a new challenge for both research and policy practice and, therefore, it has never been more important to understand policy ideas.

The widespread adoption of mobile communications and social media channels offers a new environment for policy-making. With social media, never has it been cheaper, easier or quicker to coin and disseminate an idea. Similarly, never has it been easier to expedite the demise of a policy idea, or to mobilise an alternative viewpoint. But also, never has it been easier to ignore a policy idea, amid such noise and information overload.

This book seeks to understand the theory and practice of making policy ideas. Its three aims are to conceptualise policy ideas, to theorise their lifecycle and to understand them in an era of social media. This book provides the first comprehensive conceptualisation of these curious mainstays of policy-making. It offers a new theorisation of the motivation and lifecycle of policy ideas. It draws on a decade of primary empirical research, with examples of policy practice in a range of UK policy initiatives. It shows how our understanding of policy ideas can be illuminated through interviews, observation, policy documents, newspaper archives and social media data.

The book argues that policy ideas are important but under-acknowledged tools of modern policy practice. And in an era of social data, where communication is rapid and voluminous, practices and methods are evolving. The book argues that policy ideas are the mechanism by which aspirations, initiatives and projects are expressed. Considerable resources are invested in their development and launch. For policy actors, deciding whether and when to engage or disengage with policy ideas can be a precarious judgement call. Considerable attention is levelled at the latest and loudest. Then the circus moves on and the policy idea is forgotten. Yet despite the centrality of policy ideas in the process of policy-making, current work tends to overlook their importance.