Book Review

Jeffares, S. (2014). **Interpreting Hashtag Politics: Policy Ideas in an Era of Social Media.** Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. 184 pp.

Stephen Jeffares has produced a multi-faceted gem of a book, all the more genuine for the occasional tiny crack or air bubble. Depending on the light, *Interpreting Hashtag Politics* is a new look at policy ideas, a contribution to interpretive methodologies and to Q-methodology more specifically, a multi-case study of recent British politics as revealed through social media analysis, or even an exemplar of integrating theory and scholarship with innovative analytic experiments.

Looked at holistically, the book reveals a coherent, if subtle, argument linking the various strands together. In my own words, that argument is something like this: one who wishes to understand better the contemporary policy landscape – whether to better pursue his or her own policy objectives or to better understand the ways policy objectives are pursued – must be proficient in detecting and interpreting the core 'story lines' carried by policy ideas as they are shaped in their flow through social media. In offering and unpacking this claim, Jeffares asserts the importance of fully appreciating the local or everyday social texture of the policy fabric. Thus, this books contributes to our ability to answer questions about why we see policy initiatives cropping up as they do, in the here and now, and with what effects. It complements works on analysing the policy process, policy evaluation, studies of sectoral policies, and many others. Accordingly, I do not envy the librarian who needs to decide where to shelve this book; perhaps it needs a shelf of its own, and will be joined soon enough by other works following in its wake.

By 'hashtag politics', Jeffares means the 'the purposive and careful naming of a policy idea or specific initiative' (p. x). He is drawn to the way the naming delimits a policy focus – labelling a particular initiative and signalling what it is about – while also creating an arena for evolution and contestation. Naming, of course, pre-dates the era of social media. So in creating his own label, Jeffares sets up for the reader the two main strands in this book: one a refreshed look at policy ideas and one a look at what can be learned about them 'in the era of social media'.

Jeffares reminds us that policy ideas have a lifecycle, during which an idea space opens, usually with some fanfare when a new idea is born and named, and then closes, perhaps abruptly but usually unheralded. The once-claimed space is no more, and even its traces may fade rapidly. Chapters 2 and 3 are dedicated to the theory of policy ideas and their lifecycles. These are both well-crafted analyses that stand well on their own and are not limited to those aspects of hashtag politics that employ social media. Chapter 2 (theorising policy ideas) belongs in all policy students' reading packs.

In Jeffares' eyes, a policy idea is an evocative miniature: a two- or three-word tag that captures a problem–solution pair in the penumbra of its meaning associations. That these associations are not the same for everyone, and that they change, motivates the need for appropriate analytical tools wielded skilfully according to appropriate methodology for finding and understanding associations and story-lines. But good analysis also requires a good conceptual lens. Jeffares takes the reader through five different ways of conceptualising a policy idea: as ideation, instrument, vision, container and brand. Together, these concepts define the nature of the 'work' done by and with a verbal label. The first groundwork for analysing the work is theorising the lifecycle. Thus in Chapter 3, Jeffares presents a second innovative theoretical discussion, modelling idea lifecycles as activity, diffusion, expectation and

'equivalence'. Equivalence, drawing from the discourse theories of Laclau and Mouffe, describes how actors engage with the idea from its first use in expressing demands to its final dislocation, when the term is severed from the meanings it once had. Jeffares illustrates with the lifecycle of Birmingham's 'Flourishing Neighbourhoods'.

Altogether, Jeffares draws on six British policy cases to illustrate the policy-idea lifecycle and its analysis. None are employed as classical case studies. Rather, Jeffares presents synopses of the cases and allows the flavour to come through in direct quotations from policy stakeholders, all selected in support of the particular theme. Thus, David Cameron's 'Big Society' is used to illustrate the different ways to think about policy ideas in chapter 2, and another national initiative, 'Total Place', is the subject of a detailed examination using Q methodology to discover how views around a new policy idea – in this case about public spending and leadership – are crystallised.

The middle chapters of the book centre on the study of policy ideas. The starting point is accepting the need to get beyond the two- or three-word label. Accordingly, the book introduces and illustrates Q methodology for the purpose of studying the associations surrounding policy ideas. In addition, it provides detailed discussions of innovative ways to pursue a range of topics as exhibited in social media, especially Twitter. The discussions are motivated by a succinct review of the social science of social media studies. Jeffares shows that a range of questions can be examined using social media data, including the shape and intensity of a particular idea's 'life', the changing content, and the associations of volumes and topics of discussions with various policy actors. Each illustration is interesting in its own terms. Together they suggest a much fuller slate of options. Thus the reader is not overwhelmed with a comprehensive menu and detailed analyses, but nevertheless gains a sense of available choices.

Few gems not kept under lock and key in a bank vault are perfect, and this gem of a book has some minor flaws. Sadly, *Interpreting Hashtag Politics* appears to have been rushed through some of the publication stages, requiring a reader to supply a missing word from time-to-time or to mentally edit an awkward phrase. I also had opportunity to reflect on the choices made in pursuit of concision and brevity. On the one hand, Jeffares is extraordinarily skilled in expressing themes in his several reviews, backed by well-chosen references. On the other hand, at times the knife has perhaps pared too much away. For example, a non-UK reader will struggle with some cryptic references to local events and court cases. Others will miss more extended treatment of the contributions of *Hashtag Politics* to discourse analysis and methodology. Having offered these two examples, however, I am mindful that Jeffares has not left us with no recourse: it is possible to use the internet to learn quickly about the local examples, or to consult the provided references for a fuller treatment of methodological fine points. Nevertheless, one should not be fooled by the book's brevity. Finally, although it would have required some additional work and a paragraph or two, readers would have benefitted from more explicit links and transitions, bearing in mind the rather subtle thrust of the book to generate new theory about policy-idea lifecycles, motivate interest in their study, and provide a range of methodological suggestions to that end. In each case, Jeffares may underestimate the challenges for readers to follow along these several new paths at once.

With so much innovative thinking on tap, the niggling small challenges are a small price to pay. Unlike some policy ideas Jeffares describes with their 1000-hour or 1000-day lifespans, much of the material in this book will live on. Researchers and students of policy who seek new directions for research or new ideas to ponder will be rewarded. Researchers from many areas of specialisation are likely to stumble on something provocative, which will inspire them as they carry out their own work. Let me end with two provocations I have noted.

First, Jeffares notes on pages 116 and 117 that 'A tweet will often engage satire, humour, parody or irony', all in the service of conveying a 'story-line' that resonates and helps to convey a message.

Jeffares continues to elaborate on the analysis and interpretation of story-lines, and does not return to the expressive genres entailed, nor what may or may not be peculiar to tweets or to the first decades of the 21ˢᵗ century. Yet, there is a rich literature on political satire, humour and so on, both before and during the era of social media (this is not my field, but a quick search returned reading that could keep me occupied for a long time; see, for examples, [4]). Likewise, there is a growing scholarship on social media as a communicative genre. How does the medium affect policy ideas? In what ways is social media satire different from pre-social media satire? Why, in what circumstances and by whom is humour employed? And, most important for building on Jeffares' beginnings, how should we theorise the discourse of policy ideas now compared with before?

My second provocation is methodological. In Chapter 4, Jeffares summarises his analysis of one policy idea using Q methodology. He describes four different viewpoints on the Total Place policy initiative, each of which is analysed under the themes of image of governance, image of Total Place, hopes and aspirations, and levers and barriers. The description of Q methodology and the analysis are, in my view, completely accurate and easily accessible to a researcher new to Q. Jeffares sees the utility of Q in capturing 'games of meaning' in the midst of a dynamic situation. Indeed, his selection of verb – to capture – is repeated often in this chapter and the other methodologically focused chapters. The methods that interest Jeffares are able to capture something sensitive or fleeting in the penumbra of associations around policy ideas, where 'capture' can be read in the senses of finding and holding something so that it can be studied. At the same time, however, he worries that Q methodology is too resource-intensive and can take too long to really address the 'here and now' of a policy idea's trajectory. But is resource-intensity necessary to capturing the fleeting? I suggest it is not.

There are many examples of Q studies done with little resource (including many done by Q methodology's founder, William Stephenson; see also [3], for an example of Q methodology applied in a weekend conflict-resolution workshop setting). As for tracking the 'here and now', there are some intriguing experimental applications presently, and no doubt great potential for more. The CiviQ project, headed by Vanessa Liston ([1]; see also [2]) illustrates the potential. In sum, Q methodology is ideally suited to detecting the nuances of expression, whereby the same string of words shifts meaning from one user to another. This applies equally to the carefully planned time-consuming exercises designed to really home in on a slippery topic as to grasping insights in the immediate hurly-burly of ideas in real time. The key is to stay focused on the unique contributions from Q-methodology studies.

Few reviewers are as well-aided as Jeffares' in considering the fitness of the book for various audiences, as he offers in his conclusion his own pitches to policy actors, social media analysts, policy researchers and analysis, Q methodologists, and interpretive policy researchers. He's right, I think, in each case, as this is a book that doesn't so much report and conclude as inspire and encourage. I look forward to seeing more work in its wake over the next several years.

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References

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