

Social media presents a growing body of evidence that can inform social and economic policy.

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10/2/2013

*Social media offers exciting data resources for researchers. But if this body of complex data and its subsequent analysis are going to positively impact public policy and services, governments may have to take a leading role in managing access and determining boundaries. **Jason Leavey** presents the findings of a new report investigating how feasible and useful evidence from social media could be at shaping public policy.*

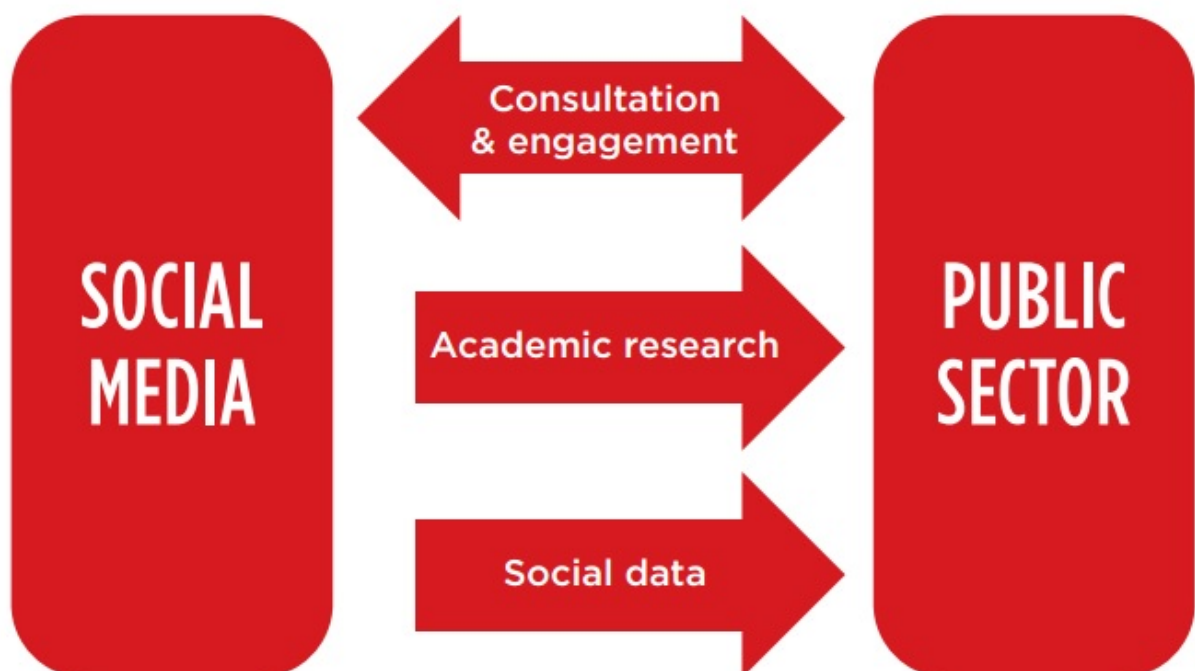


Can social media data – that is, the vast amounts of publicly available data generated by people – improve the timeliness and quality of the evidence base that informs public policy? And if so, how? It's a complex question involving a number of variables that have an uncertain trajectory: a growing cultural acceptance of digital technology and maturing social media techniques, technological advances, public responses to privacy violations by governments and corporations, the level of access to the data, advances in 'big data' tools. To name but a few.

Evidence is already drawn from social media across the public sector on an ad hoc basis. A health body trying to develop a better understanding of a mental illness. A local councillor absorbing reaction on social media to a planning decision. A law enforcement agency getting an instant picture of a suspected criminal's life. An executive agency understanding public perceptions to inform its communication strategy. A government minister picking up the conclusions of an academic study through Twitter. And so on.

A more sophisticated and overarching approach that uses social media data as a source of primary evidence requires tools that are not yet available. Making sense of social media data in a robust fashion will require a range of different skills and disciplines to come together. This is a process already taking shape in the research community, but it could be hastened by government.

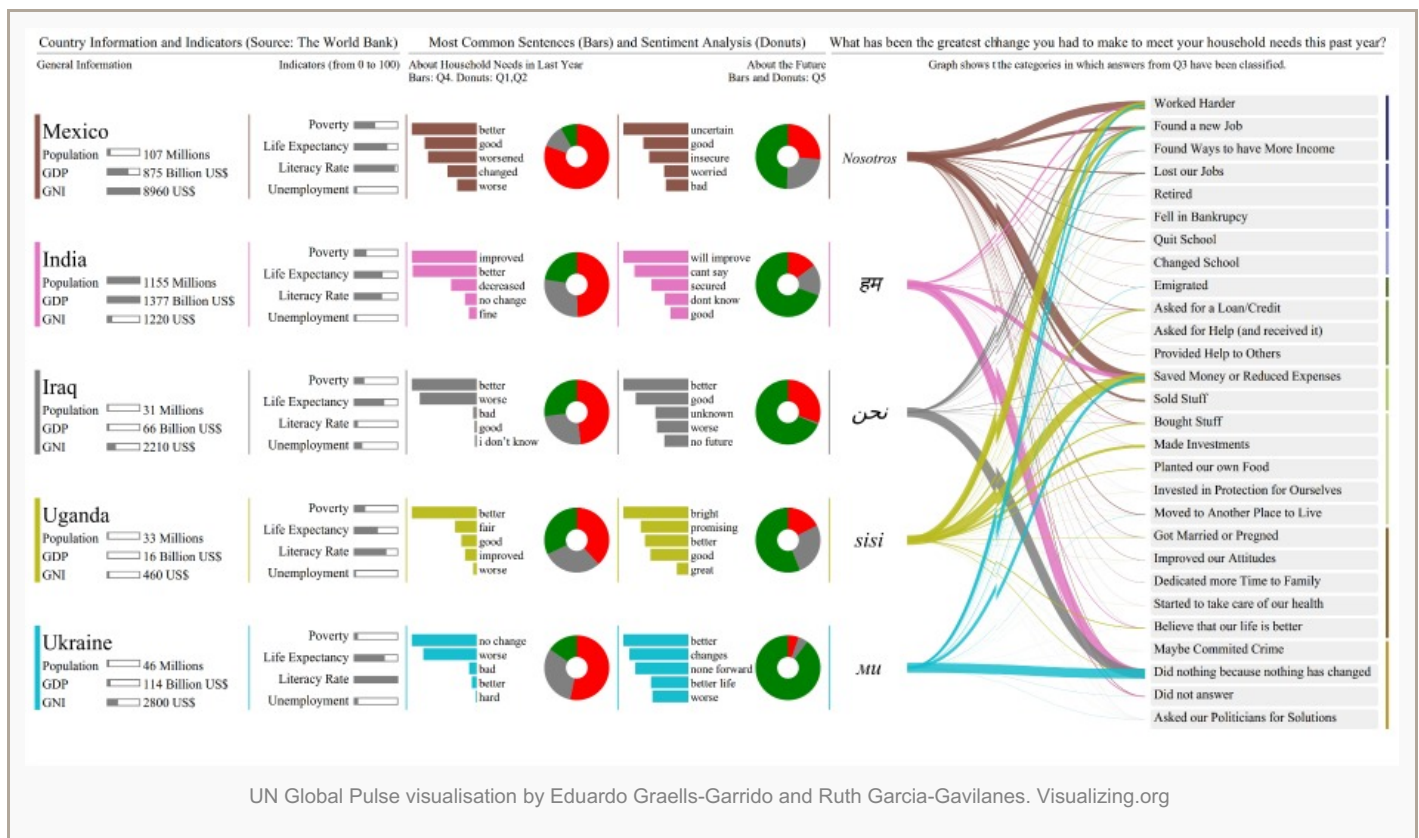
Figure 1: Sources of evidence from social media



Source: Jason Leavy (2013), [Social Media and Public Policy: What is the Evidence?](#) [pdf].

Understanding the provenance of social media data is challenging, this makes it correspondingly hard to correctly weight the data drawn from it. But academics and researchers [are steadily making inroads into these](#) and other methodological challenges. A [significant level of capital funding](#) is going into 'big data' and social media research this year. These efforts will soon produce rich datasets that have the potential to inform policy and enhance public service delivery. A significant challenge will then lie in understanding how the public sector could adopt such data driven insights.

The Alliance for Useful Evidence, a publicly funded network that champions the use of evidence in social policy and practice, has published a report [Social Media and Public Policy, what is the evidence?](#) that looks at the opportunity, challenge and risk involved in going down this road. When robust insights from social media data are used in tandem with traditional research methods and other data sources they open the door to robust, detailed, up-to date and possibly real-time socio-economic indicators. Broadly speaking, this type of approach is already practiced by the UN through its [global pulse initiative](#). It takes a range of data sources: – social media, public news sources, blogs, web forums, public e-commerce sites, anonymised financial transactions, anonymised mobile phone usage records and records of web searches. It combines these and applies the judgement of experts with a good understanding of the local context to produce indicators that track and anticipate the impact of socio-economic crises.



These may not be quite as robust as traditional poverty indicators but the value of real-time insights in situations that can deteriorate very rapidly are proving invaluable. In disaster recovery citizen-led initiatives on the ground generate valuable data that is collected, verified and then presented to international development agencies that lead the relief effort.

In the UK the way we use technology and the social imperatives are very different, of course. We are more likely to see indicators emerging that could inform central, local government and public service delivery organisations about a changing economic environment. Social media could also prove invaluable as an early warning indicator for public service failure in areas such as health and transport. It is a voice outside the silo where traditional warning systems

may have already failed.

Another major question that hangs over this issue is privacy. Researchers are reliant on ethical frameworks that many of them feel are inadequate for the digital age and subsequently are uncomfortable with the level of intrusion involved in social media research. Social media is a major disruption to decades of highly evolved privacy legislation. For the state the tension is already palpable. How the public responds to revelations about intelligence agencies' use of social media data may have an impact on another arm of the state being able to obtain large datasets which could improve health outcomes, for example. Add to that the increasing re-use of anonymised data automating decisions that affect people and you have the ingredients for a high degree of suspicion which could potentially result in a loss of trust amongst the general public. This could be countered to a large extent by a more up front approach by government. More public debate about the extent to which we allow technology to shape our society would also help.

Social media data offers a nascent but rapidly growing opportunity to overhaul and significantly enhance the process by which government understands society and the impact of its policies. It could also prove to be a considerable opportunity for social science to make a valuable and highly visible contribution to policy development and public service delivery.

Access to that data is in the hands of the big technology companies. They have become actors in the public policy arena. They are setting the boundaries for participation and hold data that is highly valuable to society. Understanding their business models and aligning with them will become increasingly important to the public sector.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

Jason Leavey is a writer, researcher and media relations consultant. His experience has been predominantly in the fields of public policy and technology.

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