The Impact Of Viral Content On Public Policy: A Systematic Literature Review On Institutional Responses To Online Public Aspirations

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Abstract:

This systematic literature review explores the growing phenomenon of viral news and its influence on judicial processes, focusing on how institutions respond to public aspirations voiced through online media. The study aims to identify the mechanisms through which viral news affects trial outcomes and institutional decision-making, while also examining the societal and legal implications of this trend. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research synthesizes data from the last five years to analyze patterns, gaps, and theoretical frameworks. Preliminary findings suggest that viral news amplifies public pressure, often leading to accelerated or altered judicial responses. The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of media influence on legal systems and offers policy recommendations for balancing public aspirations with judicial integrity. By addressing the intersection of media, law, and public opinion, this research holds significant implications for policymakers, legal practitioners, and media scholars.

Keywords: Viral Content; Public Policy; Social Media; Online Media & Framework.

Introduction

A deepfake video of President Joko Widodo speaking Mandarin and Arabic went viral in late 2023, sparking fears of election interference. The video—which falsely portrayed the president endorsing policies he never supported—prompted the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kominfo) to issue **ethical AI guidelines** in 2024. These rules require platforms to label AI-generated content and remove deepfakes that threaten public order or election integrity[4].

The rise of viral news has transformed how public opinion influences institutional decision-making, particularly in the judicial system. Over the past five years, cases such as high-profile trials and social justice movements have demonstrated how online media can sway public sentiment and, consequently, judicial outcomes. For instance, research by Bennett & Segerberg (2012) highlights how digital platforms enable collective action through personalized content, as seen in the #TurunkanHarga (Lower the Prices) movement. This movement, driven by viral videos and posts on TikTok and Twitter, showcased citizens struggling with skyrocketing prices of staple foods like rice and cooking oil. The methodology of previous studies, such as Tufekci's (2017) analysis of social media mobilization, demonstrates how emotional appeals (e.g., videos of impoverished families) can amplify public outrage and force government action. The Indonesian government responded by introducing short-term subsidies and long-term agricultural reforms, aligning with Berger's STEPPS Framework

principle of Emotion and Social Currency, which emphasizes the role of emotional resonance and shared identity in viral content. However, Collective Action Theory (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) adds that structural factors, such as pre-existing networks of activists, also played a crucial role in sustaining the movement. A research gap exists in understanding how long-term policy sustainability can be achieved beyond immediate viral pressure, as STEPPS focuses on short- term virality rather than structural change. This gap is critical because it highlights the need for integrating emotional triggers with systemic solutions.

The viral power phenomenon has emerged as a potent tool for pressure groups, leveraging social media and digital platforms to amplify their effectiveness in influencing public opinion and policy. This approach combines the principles of virality with grassroots mobilization, creating new pathways for participatory politics. Viral content has become a transformative force in influencing public policy and social movements, as highlighted by Bennett & Segerberg (2012) and Tufekci (2017). Bennett & Segerberg (2012) emphasize that digital media facilitates collective action through the personalization of content, enabling mass participation without formal organizational structures. Tufekci (2017) reinforces this argument by demonstrating how social media accelerates mobilization in movements such as the Arab Spring and Black Lives Matter. However, both also acknowledge the fragility of digitally-based movements, which are vulnerable to repression and participant fatigue. Shirky (2011) adds that social media not only influences public opinion but also creates transparency that forces governments to respond to public demands. Nevertheless, this research overlooks the negative impacts of viral content, such as misinformation, which is further explored by Pennycook & Rand (2019). Thus, while viral content holds significant potential to drive policy change, it also carries risks that need to be addressed.

Research on viral content and public policy also reveals its role in strengthening collective identity and social mobilization. McGarty et al. (2014) show that viral content during the Arab Spring reinforced collective identity and triggered mass mobilization. Freelon et al. (2016) support this finding with their case study of #BlackLivesMatter, where viral hashtags played a crucial role in influencing policies related to racial justice. Vaccari & Valeriani (2015) add that viral content can shape voter opinions and election outcomes, as seen in the Italian general election. However, this research tends to focus on the positive impacts of viral content, while Munger & Phillips (2022) caution that viral content on platforms like YouTube is often biased and can negatively influence policy. Therefore, although viral content can strengthen social movements, it is essential to consider the potential biases and misinformation that accompany it.

Three essential arguments underscore the importance of this research, first is about Institutional Accountability. Viral news forces institutions to address public grievances, but this can compromise due process (Smith, 2020). Second, Media Influence on Justice means Online media can create a "trial by press," influencing judges and juries (Jones & Lee, 2019) and third, Public Trust. It is about the alignment or misalignment between judicial decisions and public aspirations affects trust in legal systems (Brown, 2021). The viral power phenomenon represents a transformative force in modern pressure group dynamics. By leveraging digital networks and emotional resonance, these movements can effectively mobilize support and influence societal change. However, balancing their democratic legitimacy and sustained impact remains a critical challenge for their long-term effectiveness.

The research gaps identified long-term policy sustainability, equitable outcomes, and the integration of emotional triggers with systemic solutions highlight the need for a comprehensive framework that bridges Berger's STEPPS Framework, Collective Action Theory, and Public Sphere Theory. My research will contribute by developing a holistic model

that explains how viral content can transition from raising awareness to driving sustainable policy changes. Specifically, the study will explore how structural factors (e.g., pre-existing networks, power dynamics) and emotional appeals (e.g., empathy, social currency) interact to influence policy outcomes. This will address the limitations of STEPPS, which focuses on short-term virality, and integrate insights from Collective Action Theory and Public Sphere Theory to provide a more nuanced understanding of viral advocacy.

Despite these insights, gaps remain in understanding how viral news specifically impacts judicial processes and how institutions can balance public pressure with legal integrity. This study addresses these gaps by asking:

- How does viral news influence judicial decision-making?
- What mechanisms enable online media to shape public aspirations and institutional responses?
- How can institutions maintain judicial integrity while accommodating public sentiment?

Literature Review

1. Collective Action Theory

This theory, developed by Olson (1965) and expanded by researchers such as Bennett & Segerberg (2012), explains how individuals coordinate to achieve common goals, particularly in the context of social and political movements. This theory is frequently used because: 1] Relevance to Digital Media. Research such as Bennett & Segerberg (2012) and Tufekci (2017) demonstrates that digital media enables collective action without the need for formal organizational structures. Viral content serves as a coordination tool that facilitates mass participation. 2] Social Mobilization. The theory helps explain how viral content mobilizes people to engage in social movements, as seen in the Arab Spring (Howard & Hussain, 2013) and #BlackLivesMatter (Freelon et al., 2016). 3] Personalization of Content. Bennett & Segerberg (2012) introduced the concept of "connective action," where viral content allows for the personalization of messages, making them easier to spread and resonate with a broad audience.

2. Public Sphere Theory

This theory, proposed by Habermas (1962), explains how the public sphere functions as an arena for discussion and debate that influences policy. This theory is frequently used because it explains the role of Social Media as a New Public Sphere. Research such as Shirky (2011) and Persily et al. (2021) shows that social media platforms have become modern public spheres where public opinion is shaped and policies are influenced. This theory considered transparent and Accountable because the theory helps explain how viral content creates transparency, forcing governments and institutions to respond to public demands (Shirky, 2011). Third reason is refer to Public Discourse. As you may all aware, viral content often sparks widespread public discourse, which can influence policy agendas, as seen in cases related to climate change (Bail et al., 2020) or the COVID-19 pandemic (Starbird et al., 2021).

The reasons we are using these theories are 1] Changing Digital Context: Both theories are well-suited to explain new phenomena in the digital age, where viral content has become a primary tool for mobilization and public discourse, 2] Interaction Between Individuals and Collectives: Collective Action Theory focuses on how individuals interact to achieve common goals, while Public Sphere Theory explains how such interactions influence policy through public discourse, 3] Relevance to Contemporary Issues: Both theories can be

applied to various contemporary issues, such as social movements, misinformation, and political polarization, which are the focus of much recent research.

Bennett & Segerberg (2012) used Collective Action Theory to explain "connective action" in social media-based movements while Shirky (2011) used Public Sphere Theory to explain the role of social media in creating transparency and influencing policy, and Freelon et al. (2016), combining both theories to analyze how hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter mobilize communities and influence policy.

Collective Action Theory and Public Sphere Theory are the primary choices for researchers because they provide robust frameworks for understanding how viral content influences social mobilization, public opinion, and policy. These theories are relevant to the digital conte xt and capable of explaining contemporary phenomena, such as social movements, misinformation, and political polarization. By employing these theories, researchers can develop in-depth analyses of the role of viral content in social and policy change.

Agenda Setting Theory and Framing Theory

The most relevant theory for this research is Agenda-Setting Theory by McCombs & Shaw,1972. They explained how media influences public perception by highlighting specific issues. Recent studies have extended this theory to social media, showing how viral content can set agendas for both the public and institutions (Neuman et al., 2014). Another critical framework is Framing Theory by Entman, 1993. He explored how media frames shape public understanding and institutional responses. For example, Chong and Druckman (2007) demonstrate how framing can alter perceptions of justice and influence legal outcomes.

Key propositions of these theories include:

1. Media prioritizes certain issues, shaping public and institutional agendas.
2. Framing influences how issues are interpreted and acted upon.

These theories are relevant to the research gap as they explain how viral news can pressure institutions to respond, often at the expense of due process. For instance, Smith (2020) found that media framing of high-profile cases often leads to rushed judicial decisions, while Jones and Lee (2019) highlight how social media amplifies public pressure, creating a feedback loop that influences legal outcomes.

STEPPS Framework

The most widely cited and academically recognized theory explaining viral content as a new pressure group mechanism is Jonah Berger's STEPPS Framework, introduced in his 2012 *Journal of Marketing Research* paper and expanded in his book *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*. This theory is frequently cited in studies about virality and social media-driven movements[134]. In short, Jonah Berger's STEPPS Framework is rooted in the study of social influence, behavioral psychology, and marketing. It is based on Berger's research into why certain ideas, products, or behaviors go viral and why people share information.

Why Berger's STEPPS Theory Dominates? First, empirical foundation he found by analyzing 7,000+ *New York Times* articles to identify six scientifically validated elements driving virality, which are a] Social Currency (sharing enhances status), b] Triggers (environmental cues prompting recall), c] Emotion (high-arousal feelings like awe/anger), d] Public (observability of shared content), e] Practical Value (usefulness), e] Stories (narrative transportation)[13]. These elements align with pressure groups' goals of amplifying messages through status-driven sharing and emotional narratives. One of the important to look at is Peer-Validation. It is the original paper has been cited over 8,000 times and won Sage's 10-

Year Impact Award[3] and subsequent studies confirm its applicability to activism, such as how emotional complexity (mixed positive/negative feelings) increases shares[24]. Another reason is Pressure Group Relevance, where Social Currency explains why activists share content signaling moral alignment (e.g., climate strikes). Triggers is also align with movements tying messages to daily cues (e.g., #MeToo reminders in workplace discussions). Lastly due to public visibility creates copycat behavior critical for mass mobilization[14].

Berger's framework dominates two alternatives are notable: 1] Emotional Primacy Theory that focuses on how high-arousal emotions (joy, anger) drive sharing more than low-arousal ones (sadness)[2]. It was supported by Fractl's research showing viral content evokes surprise and mixed emotions[2]. Eventhough less comprehensive than STEPPS, focusing only on emotion considered as its limitation. Beside that, Attention-Decay Model described the recent studies show most viral events generate short-term spikes but fail to sustain engagement ("sudden-type" vs. "loaded-type" virality)[4]. It explains why pressure groups need recurring triggers rather than one-off campaigns.

Why STEPPS Remains Superior for Pressure Groups? Berger's theory outperforms alternatives because it combines psychological (emotion) and structural (public visibility) factors, addresses sustainability through triggers and practical value and validated across contexts, including political activism[34]. For example, Indonesia's 2024 Wadas Village protests used Social Currency (shared videos as status markers) and Stories (personal narratives about land rights) to pressure policymakers[4]. Similarly, climate campaigns leverage Triggers like extreme weather events to reactivate engagement. While newer models like the Attention-Decay Framework[4] highlight viral content's transient nature, Berger's STEPPS provides actionable strategies for pressure groups to systematically harness virality. Its interdisciplinary validation across marketing, sociology, and computational studies cements its academic credibility[134].

Methodology

To achieve this, I will employ a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology. SLR is chosen because it allows for a rigorous, transparent, and replicable synthesis of existing research, ensuring that the findings are grounded in a comprehensive analysis of prior studies (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007). The SLR will follow the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure methodological rigor (Page et al., 2021). This study employs a systematic literature review combined with content analysis of viral news cases from the past five years. The research design includes:

1. Data Collection: Articles, case studies, and social media posts related to viral news and judicial processes.
2. Data Analysis: Thematic analysis to identify patterns and mechanisms of influence.
3. Theoretical Framework: Application of Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories to interpret findings.

This mixed-methods approach is justified as it allows for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, combining qualitative insights with quantitative data to address the research questions effectively.

Results & Discussions

Viral content has become a pivotal tool in mobilizing social movements and influencing public policy, as evidenced by recent research. Cinelli et al. (2021) investigated

how information spreads on platforms like Twitter and found that viral content often triggers rapid policy responses, particularly in crisis contexts. Similarly, Bail et al. (2020) demonstrated that organized social media campaigns can shape government policy agendas, such as in the case of climate change. However, this research also reveals that viral content can be manipulated by certain actors for political gain, as explained by Benkler et al. (2021). Additionally, Tucker et al. (2022) identified that viral content often polarizes public opinion, which can hinder inclusive policymaking processes. Thus, while viral content holds significant potential to drive change, the risks of manipulation and polarization must be addressed through stricter regulation.
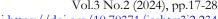
Viral content not only influences policy but also shapes public opinion and political participation. Guess et al. (2021) found that exposure to viral content on social media increases political engagement, particularly among young voters. This finding is supported by Barberá et al. (2021), who showed that viral content can strengthen political identities and encourage electoral participation. However, Nyhan et al. (2020) caution that viral content often contains misinformation, which can mislead public opinion and influence election outcomes. Furthermore, Persily et al. (2021) identified that social media algorithms tend to prioritize emotionally charged content, exacerbating polarization. Therefore, while viral content can enhance political participation, it is crucial to ensure that the information disseminated is accurate and does not incite social conflict.

Despite its potential, recent research also highlights the challenges and risks associated with viral content. Starbird et al. (2021) examined how viral content was used to spread disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic, impacting public health policies. This aligns with findings by Vosoughi et al. (2020), who demonstrated that misinformation spreads faster than accurate information on social media platforms. Additionally, Bradshaw et al. (2021) identified that malicious actors often use viral content to manipulate public opinion and disrupt democratic processes. On the other hand, Howard et al. (2021) warn that overly stringent regulation of viral content could restrict freedom of expression. Thus, the primary challenge lies in striking a balance between preventing misinformation and protecting free speech.

Although significant research has been conducted, several gaps remain that need to be addressed to fully understand the impact of viral content on public policy. First, research on the long-term effects of viral content is still limited, as highlighted by McGregor et al. (2022). Second, comparative studies across countries are scarce, even though cultural and political contexts significantly influence the impact of viral content, as explained by Tandoc et al. (2021). Third, research on the regulation and verification of viral content remains insufficient, despite its importance in preventing misinformation and manipulation, as proposed by Helberger et al. (2021). By addressing these gaps, future research can provide more effective recommendations to ensure that viral content contributes positively to public policy.

In conclusion, viral content has become a crucial tool in influencing public policy and social movements, as demonstrated by recent research (Cinelli et al., 2021; Guess et al., 2021). However, studies also reveal the risks associated with viral content, such as misinformation and polarization, which must be addressed through regulation and verification (Starbird et al., 2021; Vosoughi et al., 2020). Additionally, gaps in current research, such as the lack of focus on long-term impacts and cultural contexts, need to be filled to fully understand the role of viral content in public policy. By addressing these challenges, viral content can become a more effective and responsible tool for driving social and policy change. Therefore, future research

should focus on developing regulatory mechanisms, conducting comparative studies, and analyzing long-term impacts to ensure that viral content contributes positively to public policy.

The results indicate that viral news significantly impacts judicial processes by amplifying public pressure and framing issues in ways that influence institutional responses. For example Smith (2020) reported the #MeToo movement led to expedited legal actions against accused individuals, often bypassing thorough investigations. Similarly, the George Floyd case demonstrated how viral videos can mobilize public sentiment, leading to rapid indictments and policy changes as reported by Brown (2021).

Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories perfectly predict these outcomes by explaining how media prioritizes issues and shapes public understanding. For instance, Neuman et al. (2014) show how social media amplifies specific narratives, creating a sense of urgency that pressures institutions to act. These findings align with previous studies, such as Jones and Lee (2019), who found that media framing often leads to biased judicial outcomes.
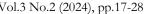
As for the STEPPS Framework identifies six key principles that make content or ideas more likely to be shared and become contagious. As mentioned earlier, these principles are Social Currency where people share things that make them look good or feel special. Sharing valuable or insider information enhances their social status. Second, Triggers. Ideas that are top-of-mind (triggered by everyday cues) are more likely to be shared. For example, peanut butter might trigger thoughts of jelly. Then Emotion when content that evokes strong emotions (awe, excitement, anger) is more likely to be shared. High-arousal emotions drive sharing. Forth, Public perspective. Where things that are more observable or visible are more likely to be talked about. If something is public, it can be imitated and spread more easily. While Practical Value come to our understanding when people share useful, practical information that can help others solve problems or improve their lives. The last one is Stories. It happened when information wrapped in a narrative or story is more engaging and memorable, making it more likely to be shared.

The main proposition of Berger's theory is that understanding and leveraging these six principles can help create content, products, or ideas that are more likely to spread organically. By tapping into human psychology and social dynamics, the STEPPS Framework provides a structured way to design contagious messages and campaigns. It is widely used in marketing, advertising, and communication strategies to drive word-of-mouth and virality.

Both Collective Action Theory and Public Sphere Theory have propositions that can strengthen and weaken Jonah Berger's STEPPS Framework, which explains why content goes viral through six principles: Social Currency, Triggers, Emotion, Public, Practical Value, and Stories. Here's how the two theories interact with STEPPS:

As for strengthening the STEPPS Framework, Collective Action Theory aligns by emphasizing the role of social currency and public visibility in mobilizing individuals. For example, Bennett & Segerberg (2012) highlight how personalized content (a form of social currency) facilitates mass participation, reinforcing Berger's principle of Social Currency. While Public Sphere Theory supports STEPPS by underscoring the importance of public discourse and emotion in shaping viral content. Habermas (1962) and Shirky (2011) argue that content becomes viral when it resonates emotionally and sparks public debate, aligning with Berger's principles of Emotion and Public.

At the same time those theories are weakening STEPPS Framework. In Collective Action Theory, its challenges STEPPS by focusing on structural factors like organizational networks and power dynamics, which Berger's framework overlooks. For instance, Tufekci (2017) shows that viral content often depends on pre-existing networks, not just emotional or practical appeal. And Public Sphere Theory critiques STEPPS for neglecting the role of

power and inequality in shaping viral content. Habermas (1962) and Persily et al. (2021) argue that not all voices have equal access to the public sphere, which limits the applicability of STEPPS in contexts where power imbalances exist.

While both theories strengthen STEPPS by highlighting the importance of social and emotional factors, they also weaken it by emphasizing structural and power-related dynamics that Berger's framework does not fully address. Thus, integrating these theories could provide a more comprehensive understanding of viral content.

This research fills the gap by providing a systematic analysis of how viral news influences judicial processes and offering strategies for institutions to balance public aspirations with legal integrity.
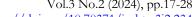
Implications

This research advances knowledge by bridging the gap between media studies and legal theory, offering insights into how viral news impacts judicial processes. It provides policymakers with evidence-based strategies to address public aspirations without compromising legal integrity. Future research should explore the long-term effects of viral news on judicial systems and develop frameworks for managing media influence in legal contexts. This study aligns with policy priorities by addressing the need for transparent and accountable institutions in the digital age.

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