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The Kingdon-Khan Model: Acknowledging the Role of Media, Public Opinion, and Social Movements in Agenda-Setting

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Article abstract

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Abstract

This article proposes the Kingdon-Khan Model (KKM) as an extension of John Kingdon's Multiple Streams Model (MSM) of agenda setting. While the MSM is comprehensively used to explain how issues reach policymakers' agendas, it underrepresents the influence of media, public opinion, and social movements on agenda setting. To address this limitation, the KKM introduces a fourth "social stream" encompassing these interrelated societal forces. Drawing on empirical research on media, public opinion, social movements, and public policy, the authors conceptualize components of social stream and its interactions with the problem, policy, and political streams. The authors illustrate the KKM's utility through examples of the Black Lives Matter and Pro-Palestinian movements. The KKM enhances the MSM's explanatory power by accounting for the complex, multidirectional forces influencing contemporary agenda setting.

Résumé

Cet article propose le Modèle Kingdon-Khan (KKM) comme extension du Modèle des courants multiples (MCM) de John Kingdon sur la mise à l'ordre du jour. Bien que le MCM soit souvent utilisé pour expliquer comment les problématiques décisionnelles sont inscrites à l'ordre du jour des décideurs politiques, il ne tient pas suffisamment compte de l'influence des médias, de l'opinion publique et des

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mouvements sociaux sur la priorisation des problématiques décisionnelles. Pour remédier à cette limitation, le KKM introduit un quatrième « courant social » qui englobe ces forces sociétales interdépendantes. Les auteurs recourent à des recherches empiriques sur les médias, l'opinion publique, les mouvements sociaux et les politiques publiques afin de mieux conceptualiser les composantes de ce courant social et ses interactions avec les trois autres courants, c'est-à-dire ceux des problèmes, des politiques et de la politique. Les auteurs illustrent l'utilité du KKM au moyen du mouvement Black Lives Matter et du mouvement propalestinien. Le KKM renforce le pouvoir explicatif du MSM en rendant compte des forces complexes et multidirectionnelles qui influencent la mise à l'ordre du jour contemporaine.

Keywords / Mots clés : Kingdon-Khan Model, Multiple Streams Model, agenda setting, media, public opinion, social movements, policy process / Modèle Kingdon-Khan, Modèle des courants multiples, mise à l'ordre du jour, médias, opinion publique, mouvements sociaux, processus politique

Background

Kingdon's (1984) Multiple Streams Model (MSM) is a prominent model that explains how issues arise on governmental agendas and how policy alternatives are specified. The MSM suggests that policy change occurs when three largely independent streams converge: the problem, policy, and political stream (Kingdon, 1984; Zahariadis, 2014). This convergence creates a window(s) of opportunities for policy entrepreneurs to influence any significant policy shifts and agenda-setting (Cairney & Jones, 2016; Kingdon, 1984).

Despite the comprehensive utility of MSM across various domains, a recent integrative review in education policy empirical research by Khan, Smith, and Meyer (2024) synthesizes several critical limitations of the model. First, the MSM's applicability beyond the U.S. political system and Western contexts is limited due to significant political, cultural, and historical differences (Baek, 2021; Chow, 2014). Second, the MSM underspecifies key concepts and mechanisms, such as the precise causal pathways through which the problem, policy, and political streams converge to produce policy change (Cino Pagliarello, 2020; Zahariadis & Exadaktylos, 2016). Third, the MSM's assumptions about the independence and convergence of streams are challenged, as researchers argue that the streams interact before they meet again, especially in non-Western contexts (Rao, 2020; Yuxin, 2020). Fourth, the MSM's focus on agenda-setting is limited, as it needs to pay more attention to policy dynamics beyond agenda-setting, such as decision-making, implementation, and evaluation (Cattaneo, 2018; Gearin, Turtura, Kame'enui, Nelson, & Fien, 2020).

Most critically, for our purposes, the Kingdon (1984) MSM neglects how media, public opinion, and social movements shape problem perceptions, policy ideas, and political pressures (Chow, 2014; Woo, 2020). Critics argue that the model overlooks the influence of media, public opinion, and social movements in driving attention to specific issues and specifying alternatives (Wolfe, 2012). Kingdon's (1984) brief reference to media as "sometimes important in magnifying movements that have al-

ready started elsewhere" (p. 60) does not capture the complex, critical role of media and extra-governmental actors in constructing policy and discourses, highlighting a significant limitation of the MSM.

To address this limitation, the authors propose the Kingdon-Khan Model (KKM), an extension of the MSM that incorporates a fourth stream—the social stream. The social stream encompasses the media, public opinion, and social movements. By integrating the social stream in the original MSM, the KKM offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding agenda-setting dynamics in our hyper-mediated, globalized policy landscape.

This article draws on empirical agenda-setting and public policy research to develop the KKM. We focus mainly on MSM applications, where the interplay of media narratives, public sentiment, and advocacy movements has been shown to significantly influence reform agendas (Feuerstein, 2015; McDonald, 2014).

Before outlining the proposed extension, it is worth briefly revisiting the Kingdon (1984) MSM for readers unfamiliar with the model. The proposed model, the KKM, which incorporates a fourth stream in the original MSM, will be visually represented later in this study.

Kingdon's Multiple Streams Model of agenda-setting: An overview

Kingdon's MSM is used to analyze the dynamics of how a public issue arises to the policy agenda through the interaction of what Kingdon (1984) calls the problem, policy, and political streams. According to Kingdon, an issue will likely get onto the policy agenda when two or more streams converge. The MSM is explained in detail below.

The problem stream

The problem stream encompasses issues that policymakers and citizens believe require attention. Kingdon (1984) identifies several mechanisms through which conditions come to be defined as problems worthy of governmental action, including indicators or statistics, special events or crises, actor's reactions, and other issues.

Indicators/statistics are quantitative measures highlighting the existence and magnitude of issues requiring policy attention (Kingdon, 1984). For example, whenever the issue of Black people's rights and racism against them gains attention in the United States, the statistics on racial disparities in police violence have served as powerful indicators of systemic racism in law enforcement (Edwards, Lee, & Esposito, 2019).

Special events/crises are dramatic occurrences, such as disasters or scandals, that suddenly draw attention to an issue (Kingdon, 1984). For example, the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 acted as a significant focusing event for the Black Lives Matter movement, sparking widespread protests and demands for police reform in the United States and across the world (Taylor, 2021).

Actors' reactions represent how various stakeholders or policy communities respond to emerging issues (Kingdon, 1984). In the context of racial justice after George Floyd's murder, policy communities in the United States have proposed various reforms, from community policing initiatives to more radical proposals such as defunding the police (Levin, 2021).

Other issues on the agenda acknowledge that new problems must compete for attention with existing priorities (Kingdon, 1984). For instance, during the height of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, policymakers had to balance addressing racial justice concerns with ongoing issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic response and economic recovery efforts in the United States (Harper-Anderson, Albanese, & Gooden, 2023; Neyman & Dalsey 2021).

The political stream

This stream captures the dynamics of the political environment. It involves a degree of political leadership, advocacy group campaigns, administrative or political turnover, and national mood (Kingdon, 1984).

Degree of political leadership refers to the strength and priorities of elected officials (Mintrom & Norman, 2009). For instance, in the context of the Pro-Palestinian movement, the Biden administration's approach to the Israel–Palestine conflict, including its support for Israel and calls for humanitarian aid in Gaza, has been a crucial factor in shaping the political landscape around this issue (Madhani & Lee, 2023).

Advocacy groups campaigns represent organized efforts by interest groups to influence policy decisions (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). For example, during the Black Lives Matter movement, advocacy groups have been pivotal in pushing for police reform and racial justice policies. Organizations such as Campaign Zero (2020) have presented comprehensive policy proposals to end police violence, influencing local and national debates on law enforcement reform in the United States (McKesson, Sinyangwe, Elzie, & Packnett, 2021).

Administrative/political turnover accounts for changes in government personnel that can shift policy priorities (Kingdon, 1984). For instance, after George Floyd's murder in May 2020, the Department of Justice under Biden restored the use of consent decrees to address police misconduct. This tool had been abandoned mainly under the Trump administration (Benner, 2021).

National mood reflects broader public sentiment (Zahariadis, 2014). For instance, the national mood shifted significantly on racial justice issues, with increased public support for the Black Lives Matter movement following high-profile incidents of police violence (Parker, Horowitz & Anderson, 2020).

The policy stream

This stream focuses on the development and selection of policy solutions. These depend on acceptability, cost and technical feasibility, and stakeholders' action (Kingdon, 1984).

Acceptability refers to the degree to which proposed solutions align with prevailing values and norms (Kingdon, 1984). For example, following the October 2023 Hamas attack and the subsequent Israeli military response in Gaza, initially, there was a broad condemnation of the Hamas attack and support for Israel's right to self-defense. However, as the conflict persisted and civilian casualties in Gaza mounted, concerns grew about the proportionality of Israel's response and its impact on Palestinian civilians. This response from the civilians led to debates about the acceptability of continued unconditional U.S. support for Israel's military actions (Madhani & Lee, 2023).

Cost and technical feasibility addresses practical implementation considerations (Zahariadis, 2014). For example, the Pro-Palestinian movement has seen various policy proposals emerge, particularly around the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign. While BDS has gained support in some circles, its acceptability remains contentious, with debates over its effectiveness and legal implications (Barghouti, 2020).

Stakeholders' actions involve various groups' efforts to shape policy outcomes (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). For example, in the Black Lives Matter movement, civil rights organizations including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) have been at the forefront, advocating for specific policy changes and legal reforms. For example, the NAACP's "We Are Done Dying" campaign outlined concrete policy demands, including a ban on knee holds and chokeholds by police (NAACP, 2021).

Policy window

The policy window represents an opportunity for policy change when problems, solutions, and political conditions align. Sometimes, multiple windows are created at the same time (Kingdon, 1984). For instance, the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 opened a significant policy window for police reform initiatives across the United States (Tolan, 2021). Similarly, in the Pro-Palestinian movement, escalations of violence and the Gaza crisis have created policy windows for renewed international attention and debate on the Israel–Palestine conflict (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Policy entrepreneurs

Policy entrepreneurs are individuals or groups who work to promote specific policy alternatives (Kingdon, 1984). Policy entrepreneurs are crucial in advancing specific solutions within Kingdon's streams (Mintrom & Norman, 2009). For example, in the Black Lives Matter movement, activists DeRay Mckesson and Patrisse Cullors have been instrumental in promoting specific policy reforms and keeping racial justice on the agenda (Ray, Brown, Fraistat, & Summers, 2022).

Convergence or coupling

The coupling or convergence of the problem, policy, and political streams with the help of policy entrepreneurs under a favourable political environment can lead to policy formulation and policy output (Kingdon, 1984). The role of policy entrepreneurs is instrumental in the coupling of streams, but sometimes, the coupling occurs even in their absence (Mintrom & Norman, 2009). For example, the Black Lives Matter movement has contributed to policy changes, including bans on chokeholds, body camera requirements, and use-of-force policy changes (Vera Institute of Justice, 2021).

While the MSM has been comprehensively applied and influential across various policy domains due to its simplicity and empirical support (Zahariadis, 2014), scholars have identified limitations and areas for improvement, particularly regarding its treatment of media, public opinion, and social movements (Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, & Su, 2010; Burstein, 2003; Khan et al., 2024; Wolfe, Jones, & Baumgartner, 2013).

Agenda-setting: Role of media, public opinion, and social movements

The role of media, public opinion, and social movements in shaping policy agendas has been a topic of growing interest in public policy research. Kingdon (1984) briefly acknowledged the media's role in agenda-setting, noting that extensive coverage "clearly does have an effect on public opinion" (p. 61), which in turn influences policy agendas. However, Kingdon (1984) did not include media as a distinct theoretical force in his model (Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006, p. 98).

The empirical research has shown that the media's influence on agenda-setting is more complex and far-reaching than initially conceived. Entman (2007) theorizes "cascading network activation" (p. 163) as a process where frames originating in media spread to elites and agencies in a downward flow of agenda-setting. Moreover, media is crucial in "constructing problems, framing causes and solutions, and priming attributions of government responsibility" (Entman, 2007, p. 164). According to Trumbo (1996), investigative reports can "disrupt issues from equilibrium into alarmed discovery" (p. 270).

Beyond transmitting elite discourses, media also refract diverse frames from inter-governmental and societal actors that complicate agenda-setting (Tresch & Fischer, 2015). According to McBeth, Shanahan, Arnell, and Hathaway (2007), culturally resonant "media narratives" can mobilize public pressure for policy action (p. 88). Critics argue that omitting media as a distinct force underestimates its independent and interactive effects across all streams of the MSM (Scheufele, 2000).

Public opinion, as registered through polls, protests, and, increasingly, social media, also has significant agenda-setting effects. Kingdon (1984) gave some credence to public opinion as an input to the political stream but concluded, "Public opinion is rarely well enough formed to directly affect an involved debate among policy specialists" (p. 67). However, subsequent research has shown that public opinion exerts direct top-down and indirect bottom-up influence on agendas (Muddiman, Stroud, & McCombs, 2014). Officials closely monitor opinion polls as "barometers" of salience and support for policies (Burstein, 2003, p. 33). Burstein (2010) also notes how "relatively few problems that attract a good deal of public attention are likely to reach the policy agenda" (p. 73), incentivizing officials to prioritize publicly salient issues. Besides this, media coverage amplifies public demands for action on unattended issues (Soroka, 2003), and gaps between public preferences and policy status quo create electoral pressure (Jones & Jenkins-Smith, 2009).

While these varied effects are implied in Kingdon's (1984) notion of the "national mood" (pp. 173–174), it remains a vague emergent force in the MSM, detached from precise mechanisms of influence. Subsequent theorising of "policy propensity" as the product of ideology, interest group balance, and global cyclical patterns only partly fills this gap (Zahariadis, 2014, p. 31). What remains missing is an integrated conception of how public opinion continuously penetrates and circulates throughout the system to shape agendas.

Even more neglected in the MSM are social movements—sustained, organized challenges to authorities by collective actors with shared identities (Della Porta & Diani, 2020). Social movements may resort to protests, boycotts, and other forms of public pressure (extra-institutional activism) when they cannot achieve their goals

by talking to politicians or working within the system (blocked from insider chan-
nels). This disrupts the usual way things are done and forces those in power to take
notice of their demands (Gamson, 1990). The dramatic impact of the Black Lives
Matter movement in pressuring lawmakers to embrace police reform indicates the
potency of mass protest in agenda-setting (Ross, Winterhalder, & McElreath, 2022).
Movements exercise power through multiple indirect pathways that overlap with
media and public opinion (Amenta et al., 2010). According to Rohlinger and Klein
(2018), movements expand issues to new audiences and arenas by staging messages
through protests, strikes, boycotts, and campaigns amplified by media. Moreover,
by mobilizing grassroots pressure on politicians, they reshape officials' political cal-
culations, introducing new discursive frames, identities, and worldviews, and thus
transform political cultures over time (Rochon, 1998). These perspectives suggest
that media, public opinion, and social movements are empirical variables and nor-
mative criteria for agenda-setting legitimacy.

Kingdon's (1984) MSM gives little explicit attention to how media coverage
shapes problem perceptions and policy debates (Wolfe et al., 2013), how public
opinion influences political decisions (Burstein, 2003), or how social movements
mobilize support and pressure for change (Amenta et al., 2010). Numerous scholars
have noted these limitations in recent years. For instance, Herweg, Huß, and
Zohlnhöfer (2015) argue that the MSM underestimates the role of public opinion in
policy formation. Similarly, Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth (2011) highlight the
model's neglect of media narratives in shaping policy agendas. According to an inte-
grative review by Khan and colleagues (2024), a fundamental critique is the model's
inadequate attention to the crucial roles of media, public opinion, and social move-
ments in shaping modern policymaking processes (Chow, 2014; Woo, 2020).

Chow (2014) criticizes the model for failing to "sufficiently acknowledge the sig-
nificance of media effects, including social media" (p. 53) in amplifying public de-
mands for policy action. Similarly, Woo (2020) contended that the model "does not
sufficiently address the role and significance of the media" (p. 38) in projecting issues
onto national policy agendas. This critique is echoed by Crow and Lawlor (2016),
who emphasized the need to incorporate media dynamics into policy process the-
ories better.

The Kingdon-Khan Model (KKM) answers this critique by introducing a social
stream that integrates media, public opinion, and social movements, offering a more
comprehensive framework for understanding contemporary agenda-setting dy-
namics. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that media, public opinion, and social
movements provide a more holistic understanding of how social movements gain
traction, mobilize resources, and ultimately influence public opinion or policy
change. Therefore, media, public opinion, and social movements were integrated
and grouped together as a social stream because of their interrelated nature. The fol-
lowing section will shed light on the KKM.

The Kingdon-Khan Model

The KKM extends Kingdon's (1984) MSM by introducing a fourth stream—the social
stream—to capture agenda-setting forces often overlooked in the original model.

The authors define the social stream as the pattern of attention, mobilization, and sentiment around policy issues generated by media coverage, public opinion, and social movement activity that shapes perceptions of problem urgency, solution viability, and political pressure.

Social movements are not monolithic entities; they thrive on a dynamic interplay between media coverage, public opinion, and social movement activity (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Koopmans, 2004; Tufekci, 2013). Media coverage acts as a megaphone, amplifying the movement's message and attracting public attention (Earl, Maher, & Elliott, 2017). This increased awareness can fuel public engagement, attracting new supporters and participants (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996). The resulting growth in the movement strengthens its social movement activity, potentially leading to more events, protests, or campaigns that attract further media attention.

For example, the Israel–Palestine conflict escalated dramatically in October 2023 following Hamas attacks and subsequent Israeli military actions in Gaza. This has sparked a surge in Pro-Palestinian sentiment and activism globally. Social media platforms have been crucial in disseminating information about the situation in Gaza, organizing protests, and shaping public opinion on the conflict. Hashtags such as #GazaUnderAttack and #StandWithPalestine gained significant traction, facilitating the spread of eyewitness accounts, images, and videos from Gaza (Alsaafin, 2023; Nasereddin, 2024). This digital activism has translated into large-scale protests in major

Figure 1: The Kingdon-Khan Model
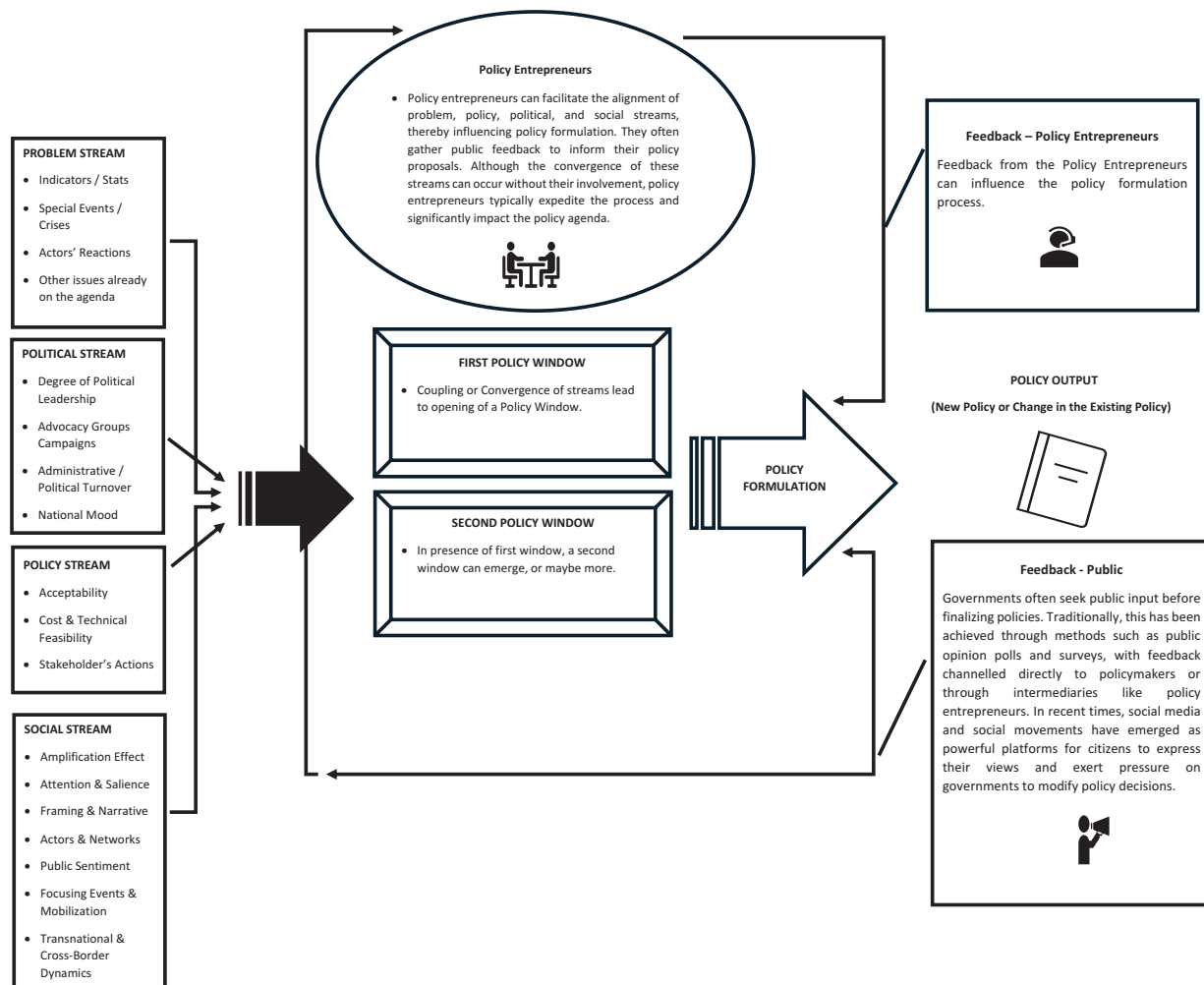
cities worldwide, demonstrating the movement's ability to rapidly mobilize in response to unfolding events (Ulfelder, 2024). The Pro-Palestinian movement has effectively used social media and grassroots organizing to elevate these problems from public discourse to formal policy agendas, compelling elected officials and institutional leaders to address the issue publicly and consider policy responses (Barghouti, 2023).

This article's central argument is that the dynamics of the social stream, both independently and through its interactions with the problem, policy, and political streams, are crucial for explaining how issues gain and maintain agenda status in contemporary policymaking. Figure 1 presents the KKM. The social stream and its seven core elements are explained further below.

Key elements of the social stream

The seven core elements of the social stream in the KKM are derived from a synthesis of empirical research on media, public opinion, social movements, and public policy (Benford & Snow, 2000; Castells, 2015; Entman, 1993; Koopmans, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The elements are: 1) amplification effect, 2) attention and salience, 3) framing and narrative, 4) actors and networks, 5) public sentiment, 6) focusing events and mobilization, and 7) transnational and cross-border dynamics. These elements are elaborated on as follows.

1. **Amplification effect:** The media, including social media, amplifies policy issues' visibility and perceived importance. As Chow (2014) argues, "the amplification effect of the media is inevitable, and its importance in the policy process is also well established" (p. 54). Media coverage can rapidly escalate issue salience, forcing policymakers to respond to sudden spikes in public attention (Wolfe et al., 2013). For example, the Black Lives Matter movement gained unprecedented amplification following George Floyd's murder in 2020. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram rapidly spread videos of the incident, leading to widespread media coverage and public outcry (Ince, Rojas, & Davis, 2021). This amplification forced policymakers to address issues of police brutality and systemic racism.

2. **Attention and salience:** The amount and prominence of media coverage devoted to a policy topic across diverse outlets signal to the public and politicians its perceived importance and newsworthiness (McCombs, 2004). Variations in issue salience, as measured by media volume, placement, and recurrence, can explain fluctuations in policymakers' attention (Soroka, 2002). For example, the Pro-Palestinian movement saw a significant spike in attention and salience following the October 2023 Israel attack event on Gaza. The volume of media coverage and social media activity around hashtags such as #GazaUnderAttack dramatically increased, elevating the Palestinian cause on the global agenda (Taha, 2023).

3. **Framing and narrative:** Media use organizing narratives, metaphors, and symbols to define problems, diagnose causes, and prescribe solutions (Entman, 1993). Policy actors strategically deploy competing media frames to shape public and policymaker perceptions of issues. These frames or narratives emphasize specific aspects of the problem and potential solutions, ultimately influencing viable and desirable options (Nisbet & Huge, 2006). Narratives, or culturally resonant stories of heroes, villains, plots, morals,

and calls to action, shape public understandings and preferences (Jones, McBeth, & Shanahan, 2014). For example, Black Lives Matter activists framed police violence as systemic racism rather than isolated incidents, using narratives of historical injustice and present-day discrimination. This framing influenced public perception and policy discussions, leading to calls for comprehensive police reform rather than individual prosecutions (Clayton, 2023).

4. **Actors and networks:** The social stream involves a diverse array of actors, including journalists, editors, opinion leaders, advocacy organizations, grass-roots activists, and policy entrepreneurs. These actors form complex networks of influence to shape media discourses, while others amplify or challenge dominant narratives (Shaw, 2019). Woo (2020) also highlights the MSM's narrow focus on formal institutions, advocating for a broader view that includes "the significant influence of local education officials" (p. 38) and the media in shaping policy outcomes and changes (p. 43). For example, the Pro-Palestinian movement involves a diverse network of actors, including Palestinian advocacy groups, international human rights organizations, and student activists. These networks have been crucial in organizing global protests and boycott campaigns, challenging dominant narratives about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Barghouti, 2023).

5. **Public sentiment:** Officials use aggregate public opinion toward policy issues expressed through surveys, polls, social media posts, and constituent communications, which furnish "representations of representations" (Herbst, 1998, p. 138) of mass preferences to gauge electoral risks and opportunities. Social media platforms have become key sites for expressing and mobilizing public sentiments, enabling new "hashtag publics" to cluster around shared problems (Rambukkana, 2015, p. 3). For example, public sentiment toward the Black Lives Matter movement shifted significantly following George Floyd's murder. Polls showed a marked increase in support for the movement and recognition of systemic racism, influencing policy discussions and corporate responses (Parker et al., 2020).

6. **Focusing events and mobilization:** In the social stream of the KKM, the concept of focusing events is significantly expanded beyond the MSM (Kingdon, 1984). While Kingdon (1984) viewed focusing events primarily as "triggering devices" for agenda-setting, the KKM integrates these events into a broader, more dynamic framework emphasizing the role of social media, which was missing when the MSM was proposed in 1984. Unlike the MSM, the KKM accounts for how digital platforms can rapidly amplify focusing events, enabling quicker and more widespread mobilization. This was demonstrated by the Pro-Palestinian activists using social media to organize global protests and share real-time information from Gaza (Nasereddin, 2024). Moreover, the KKM views focusing events as part of an ongoing, interactive process that can maintain attention on an issue long after the initial event, exemplified by the prolonged global protests following George Floyd's murder in 2020 (Ince et al., 2021). Lastly, the KKM recognizes the transnational impact of focusing events on our globalized world, as seen in the worldwide Pro-Palestinian protests in 2023 (Bowman & Wamsley, 2023).

7. **Transnational and cross-border dynamics:** The social stream often transcends national boundaries in an era where social media use has multiplied

many folds. Transnational advocacy networks (Keck & Sikkink, 1998) and international news flows (Segev, 2015) can rapidly diffuse frames, narratives, and mobilization tactics across contexts, shaping domestic policy agendas. Social media platforms enable the formation of "transnational counterpublics" (Fraser, 2007, p. 27) that can challenge dominant discourses and power structures. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement quickly gained international support, with protests occurring in multiple countries, including the United Kingdom, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Australia, and New Zealand. This transnational solidarity influenced domestic policy discussions in various nations, leading to examinations of racial injustice beyond the United States (Oladipo, 2023).

The above seven elements illustrate how issues are socially constructed, amplified, and contested through dynamic interactions. Before further detailing the social stream in KKM, it is essential to clarify the distinctions between the concepts of coupling, dynamics, and interactions, as they are closely related terminologies.

Coupling refers to the process by which elements from different streams are brought together at critical moments to create policy windows (Kingdon, 1984; Zahariadis, 2014). In the KKM, coupling involves the alignment of all four streams (problem, policy, political, and social) to create opportunities for policy change.

Dynamics refer to the internal processes and changes within the social stream itself. These include attention cycles, framing contests, and feedback loops within the stream (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Downs, 1972).

Interactions describe how the social stream influences and is influenced by the other three streams (problems, policies, and political) without necessarily leading to policy change. For example, media coverage might amplify a problem or public opinion might shape policy alternatives, but it may not change the existing policy (Soroka, 2002; Wolfe et al., 2013).

Understanding these distinctions is crucial for grasping how the social stream operates independently and in conjunction with the other streams in the policy process. The following sections will explore each of these aspects in detail.

Coupling of the social stream with the Multiple Streams Model

Integrating the social stream into the MSM is a key innovation of the KKM. This stream is conceptualized not as a separate or independent domain but as a cross-cutting and integrative force that shapes and is shaped by the problem, policy, and political stream through complex feedback loops and interactions (Jones & Jenkins-Smith, 2009). For instance, media coverage of a focusing event may spark public concern and social movement mobilization, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of attention and pressure. Alternatively, sustained advocacy efforts may eventually shift media framing and public opinion on an issue, altering its political salience. For example, the video of George Floyd's murder in 2020 acted as a focusing event, leading to extensive media coverage that sparked widespread public outrage and mobilized massive protests across the United States and globally (Clayton, 2023). This, in turn, placed significant pressure on policymakers to address issues of police brutality and systemic racism. Crucially, the social stream does not operate in isolation but constantly interfaces with and shapes the other three streams.

Problem stream: Media coverage and social movement activity are critical in problem definition and framing, influencing which conditions are perceived as pressing public issues. Public opinion shifts can alter policymaker perceptions of problem urgency and importance. Li and Lu (2018) illustrate this in their study of early childhood education legislation in China, where media narratives of educational inequalities and the importance of early childhood development significantly shaped how policymakers understood and prioritized issues in the sector. These narratives and the media's focus on these aspects influenced both public opinion and policymakers' perceptions, ultimately contributing to the prioritization of early childhood education on China's policy agenda (Li & Lu, 2018).

Policy stream: Media discourse and public deliberation contribute to generating and refining policy alternatives. Social movements often introduce new policy ideas and pressure for their adoption. Public opinion constrains the range of politically viable solutions. Baek (2021) demonstrates how media coverage and public debates influenced the development of policy alternatives for South Korea's Free-Semester Program, introducing ideas that might have yet to emerge from traditional policy communities.

Political stream: Media narratives shape perceptions of the national mood and build or erode support for policy change. Public opinion trends influence policymakers' calculations of political risk and opportunity. Social movements alter the balance of organized forces supporting or opposing change. Cattaneo (2018) showed how media narratives and public opinion significantly influenced the political feasibility of charter school legislation in New York.

Adding the social stream allows for a comprehensive analysis of complex policy processes. It captures important dynamics that may need to be noticed or underspecified in applications of the original MSM. These dynamics are explained below.

Dynamics of the social stream

The social stream is characterized by complex internal dynamics influencing policy processes. These include:

Attention cycles: Issues tend to move through cycles of media coverage and public attention, as described by Downs' (1972) issue-attention cycle. Initial "alarmed discovery" (p. 39) of a problem can lead to intense focus, followed by the realization of costs and an eventual decline in interest. However, as Wolfe and colleagues (2013) note, the contemporary media environment can accelerate and fragment these cycles, leading to more volatile attention patterns.

Framing contests: Different actors compete to define issues and shape public understanding through strategic framing. Chong and Druckman (2007) describe how elites, interest groups, and social movements engage in framing contests through media channels, with successful frames influencing both public opinion and policymaker perceptions.

Feedback loops: Media coverage, public opinion, and social movement activity often reinforce each other in complex feedback loops. For instance, protest events may generate media coverage, shaping public opinion and potentially spurring further mobilization. Walgrave and Vliegenthart (2012) explore the relationship between media, public opinion, and mobilization in Belgium.

Network effects: The rise of social media and online communities has introduced new network dynamics to public discourse and mobilization around policy issues. Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) study highlights how digital networks enable rapid diffusion of frames and coordination of action without traditional organizational structures.

Interactions of the social stream with other streams

The social stream does not operate in isolation but constantly interacts with and shapes the problem, policy, and political streams. Key patterns of interaction include: 1) problem definition and salience, 2) policy alternative generation and refinement, 3) political opportunity structures, 4) window opening and closing, 5) policy entrepreneurship, and 6) cross-stream amplification and dampening.

Problem definition and salience: Media coverage and social movement activity are crucial in defining problems and elevating their salience on the policy agenda. Stone (1989) argues that problem definition is inherently political, involving strategically using causal stories to assign responsibility and suggest solutions.

Policy alternative generation and refinement: Public discourse and deliberation, often mediated through traditional and social media, contribute to generating and refining policy alternatives. Unlike Kingdon's (1984) MSM, the social stream introduces new pathways for ideas to enter and evolve within the policy stream.

Political opportunity structures: The social stream shapes the political context in which policy decisions are made, influencing perceptions of the national mood, the balance of organized political forces, and the electoral incentives facing policymakers. McAdam's (1982) political process model of social movements highlights how changes in the broader political environment create opportunities for rival groups to influence policy.

Window opening and closing: The dynamics of the social stream can play a crucial role in opening or closing policy windows. Sustained media attention, public pressure, and social movement mobilization can create a sense of urgency around an issue, compelling policymakers to act. Conversely, waning attention or shifts in public sentiment can cause windows to close prematurely. Zahariadis and Exadaktylos (2016) observe these dynamics in their study of higher education reforms in Greece, noting how media coverage and public protests shaped the decline and flow of reform opportunities.

Policy entrepreneurship: The social stream provides new arenas and tools for policy entrepreneurs to couple streams and push for change. Mintrom and Norman (2009) argue that influential policy entrepreneurs are skilled at using media strategies, shaping public opinion, and leveraging social movements to advance their preferred solutions.

Cross-stream amplification and dampening: The social stream can amplify or dampen signals in the other streams. For instance, intense media coverage of a focusing event on the problem stream can heighten its impact on the agenda. Similarly, public opinion trends can strengthen or weaken the influence of organized interests in the political stream. According to Wolfe and colleagues (2013), the media, public opinion, and interest group activities interact dynamically, influencing policy attention and action.

These couplings, dynamics, and interactions underscore how the four streams in KKM influence contemporary policymaking processes.

Discussion

The KKM offers significant implications for policy research and practice. By incorporating the social stream, the KKM provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding agenda-setting dynamics in contemporary policymaking. The model's inclusion of media, public opinion, and social movements offers valuable insights into the complex interplay between traditional policy actors and broader societal forces. For instance, the Black Lives Matter movement demonstrates how social media can rapidly amplify issues, with platforms such as Twitter and Instagram spreading videos of incidents like George Floyd's murder, leading to "widespread media coverage and public outcry" (Ince et al., 2021, p. 45). From another perspective, Trump's 2025 inauguration recently confirmed that his cross-platform media strategy sets policy agendas by generating engagement regardless of platform (Zhang, Lukito, Suk, & McGrady, 2025). His simultaneous use of Truth Social for unfiltered messaging and official presidential channels demonstrates how executive power amplifies digital influence, allowing him to dictate which issues receive media attention and arise on the agenda. This dual-platform approach reinforces agenda-setting theory's modern evolution, where political figures can now bypass traditional media gatekeepers while still commanding mainstream coverage, ultimately leading to increasingly fragmented information ecosystems defined by partisan preferences (Zhang et al., 2025).

Similarly, the Pro-Palestinian movement has effectively used social media to "share real-time updates and personal stories from Gaza," influencing public opinion and media narratives, which subsequently led to "large-scale protests and calls for policy changes in various countries" (Alsaafin, 2023, p. 12). Recently, the 2025 Israel–Hamas ceasefire negotiations exemplify how social media has transformed conflict reporting, with real-time documentation from affected populations often outpacing and contradicting official diplomatic narratives. Artwork from Gaza, such as artist Dina Mattar's work shared globally through social media, created parallel information streams, transferring issue salience to international audiences, elevating humanitarian crises on the policy agenda, and forcing policymakers to prioritize ceasefire (Fletcher, Richardson, & Akın, 2025).

The KKM's recognition of media framing's role in policy debates encourages systematic analysis of how actors deploy media frames to influence policy outcomes. The model's emphasis on public opinion, mainly through social media, provides a framework for analyzing how real-time public sentiment shifts can alter policy reforms' viability. Furthermore, the KKM's focus on social movements and advocacy networks offers insights into how non-elite actors can influence policy agendas, addressing critiques that traditional models were too focused on policy elites. The addition of transnational and cross-border dynamics of the social stream is particularly relevant for understanding the global flow of policy ideas.

Future researchers could explore several directions when applying KKM. Comparative studies could analyze agenda-setting across contexts, examining how media, public opinion, and social movement variations influence policy outcomes.

The model's potential application to pressing global issues such as girls' education could offer insights into how media coverage, public opinion shifts, and international advocacy movements shape policy agendas across different national and international contexts. This could inform more effective strategies for advancing gender equity in education worldwide. The researchers should aim to empirically test, validate, and investigate the boundary conditions and contingencies that shape the coupling of the streams and reflect on the normative implications of the KKM for democratic governance and public participation in the policy process.

In sum, the KKM offers a promising framework for advancing our understanding of agenda-setting and policymaking. The authors hope this extended model, with an added social stream and recognition of the influence of media, public opinion, and social movements in agenda-setting and policy formulation, will inspire new empirical investigations and theoretical innovations in the field of public policy.

Conclusion

This article proposes the KKM as an extension of Kingdon's (1984) MSM by incorporating a social stream in the original MSM. The social stream encompasses the media, public opinion, and social movements. Drawing on empirical research on media, public opinion, social movements, and public policy, this article has conceptualized this stream's key elements, coupling dynamics, and interactions with the problem, policy, and political streams. The KKM contributes to the theoretical advancement of public policy studies by addressing a significant limitation of the original MSM, namely its neglect of the role of media, public opinion, and social movements in shaping policy agendas. By integrating these factors as a coherent and multifaceted stream—the social stream—the KKM offers a more comprehensive and contextually relevant framework for understanding agenda-setting dynamics in contemporary policymaking.

In short, the KKM proposed in this article makes a valuable contribution to account for the role of the growing influence of media, public opinion, and social movements in agenda-setting by extending the Kingdon MSM. It opens new avenues for empirical research and theoretical innovation in public policy studies.

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