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# Media Policy Research and Practice: Insights and Interventions

## *Introduction*

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The question of impact looms over media policy scholarship. Despite engaging similar issues, media policy makers and communication scholars often diverge in defining the scope of the problems they address, with the former group largely guided by economic and legal analysis and influenced by partisan ideologies and political obligations. In the introductory essay for this Special Section, we highlight the value of communication scholars' contributions to policy debates, particularly given their broader analytical frame and critical focus. Against this backdrop, we situate the Consortium on Media Policy Studies (COMPASS) program, which is designed to immerse students of communication policy in the policy-making processes to inform their research. As the contributions to this Special Section illustrate, this nexus of communication scholarship and policy-making practice yields important insights and interventions, shedding light on the most pressing policy issues we face today.

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The question of impact both motivates and looms over media policy scholarship. It is not new, nor is the communication field's reticence to participate directly in the policy process (Just & Puppis, 2012; Napoli & Gillis, 2006). Despite engaging similar issues, policy makers and communication scholars often diverge in defining the scope of the problems they address, with the former group largely guided by economic and legal analysis and influenced by partisan ideologies and political obligations (Ang, 2008). Furthermore, policy makers rarely seek out communication research to inform their decisions (Napoli & Gillis, 2006).

Despite these disconnects, communication scholarship potentially can have a positive impact on public debates and policy-making decisions (Just & Puppis, 2012; Napoli & Gillis, 2006; Pickard, 2015). By exposing the often-hidden power relationships underlying policy decisions, media scholars can help make the policy process more democratic, inclusive, and accountable to the public (Freedman, 2014). Such

scholarship moves beyond the narrow questions of media policies' economic impact on relevant markets and their legal implications. Instead, it requires a broader structural approach to draw attention to persistent problems that lie at the root of media systems and regulatory regimes.

This wider analytical frame encompasses crucial social, political, and normative dimensions of media policy, explicitly linking our communications infrastructure and media system to their roles in a democratic society. It engages questions of power and structural incentives that often are at odds with democratic imperatives. Thus, media policy scholarship is well equipped to foreground essential questions about media representation, equity of access, diversity of ownership, and inclusive discourse that often do not receive enough attention in policy maker analyses and debates. This focus reveals a serious commitment to the meaning of media policy in "the public interest," rather than dismissing it as a vague construct, best defined by consumer demand.

Such public interest-oriented scholarship can yield new lenses for old policy problems. By providing theoretical constructs that help us understand and address these problems, scholars can encourage important policy interventions. For instance, as U.S. policy makers leave journalism to weather the whims of the market, scholars frame news and information media as "public goods," drawing attention to their inherent social value ignored by economic analysis (Baker, 2002; Pickard, 2014). This kind of research helps advance arguments for public subsidies to sustain a viable press system, an area of scholarship that deserves more attention in the coming years.

Another recent example involves privacy protections. As policy makers debate the competitive impact of unfettered corporate collection of user data, academic research shines a light on the public's resignation in the face of data-collection regimes, throwing into question arguments about rational consumer trade-offs between data surrender and any resulting benefits (Turow, Hennessy, & Draper, 2015). Moreover, this research also focuses the debate on how increasingly data-driven markets discriminatorily allocate benefits, feeding user data into algorithms that define and discard "less valuable" consumers (often low-income and already-marginalized) from access to the benefits of participation in these markets (Turow, 2017).

Such interventions exemplify the contributions of communication research to ongoing media policy debates. Mindful of lessons from history, attuned to systemic social and political inequities, and committed to critically examining the structural power differentials in media policy formation, such scholarship fills significant gaps left by traditional policy analysis, with the goal of making the media system more democratic, equitable, and just. This critical approach is increasingly salient at a time when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and other regulatory agencies are adopting an extreme market libertarian approach to media policy. Public interest-oriented media policies that protect the open Internet and online privacy are under threat or already overturned. The American news media system continues to face economic crises as well as political attacks from the White House. And the growing corporate influence on the policy process poses significant challenges for impactful policy scholarship that seeks to help democratize the media system. Policy scholars' insights are often overlooked or outright ignored by policy makers, who rely on narrow analytical tools and advice from lobbyists, which perpetuates these problems. Yet, these developments also demonstrate the increasing need for critical

policy research that contributes to public debate and understanding of these issues, helping maximize public input and mobilize action to counter these trends.

The essays in this Special Section represent such public-facing scholarship that addresses important and contemporary media policy problems while bridging communications theory with policy practice. Their authors, a cohort of doctoral students who participated in the Consortium on Media Policy Studies (COMPASS) program, directly experienced the daily policy-making processes at various government institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including Free Press, the National Institutes of Health, Pew Research Center, and the World Bank. The COMPASS fellowships provided a bridge between communications research and policy practice, reflected in the contributions included here that encompass a range of methodological and theoretical approaches and incorporate both critical and empirical traditions. The commentaries in this Special Section engage various policy issues, from user privacy to the journalism crisis, offering new theoretical frameworks for grappling with these problems, highlighting their overlooked dimensions, and introducing tools for maximizing public understanding of them. Although they are wide-ranging in focus, they share a commitment to engage with core communication issues. The contributors' research addresses omissions within traditional policy analysis, and by doing so, these rising scholars help further the capacity for communication research to intervene against key social problems.

## The COMPASS Program

COMPASS aims to link media policy scholarship and policy-making practice. Formed in 2004 through collaboration among several communication studies departments, the consortium "seeks to address the paucity of well-informed, well-researched media policy and regulation" (COMPASS, 2017, para. 6). COMPASS places emphasis on exposing doctoral students of media policy to the actual practice of policy making to better inform their research. At the same time, it encourages government and NGO policy makers to incorporate insights from such scholarship into their daily work. This reflects the program's commitment to the idea that communications research, with its interdisciplinary origins, structural focus, and critical approach, can provide meaningful contributions to media policy analyses and debates.

COMPASS participants secure fellowships related to their research interests, with the assistance and funding from participating U.S. universities, and work in government institutions such as the State Department and the FCC and in nonprofit media advocacy organizations and think tanks like Common Cause, Free Press, Public Knowledge, and the New America Foundation. During their eight- to 10-week summer fellowships, COMPASS fellows are exposed to the daily practices of media policy making, while contributing research to the policy work of their host institutions. The program complements this experience with a weekly seminar about the mechanics of the policy process, including how communication scholarship can assist policy makers. By the end of their fellowships, COMPASS fellows gain an in-depth understanding of a specific policy area, acquire experience in interacting with policy makers, and, through their research, contribute to media policy discussions and decisions. The COMPASS training assists in preparing scholars to address new media policy challenges and formulate informed interventions through their scholarship.

## Contributions in this Special Section

The contributors to this Special Section of the *International Journal of Communication* are all former COMPASS fellows who spent their summers working alongside policy makers in various federal and nonprofit institutions. Their essays represent a range of scholarship engaging contemporary and pressing media policy subjects, informed by direct exposure to the policy-making process. Utilizing diverse methodological and theoretical approaches, these commentaries reveal the value of communications research in grappling with complex policy issues and proposing novel interventions. These interventions offer both new ways to think about policy-related problems and specific recommendations that aim to resonate not just with policy makers and scholars but also with the broader public.

One strand of the contributions directly addresses the shortcomings of data-gathering institutions that contribute to public knowledge of policy issues. For example, Rachel E. Moran's essay identifies several limitations of the FCC's Online Public Inspection File (OPIF) system for identifying sponsors behind political ads. Her policy recommendations outline specific improvements to promote a more accurate and accountable system to the public. Sonia Jawaid Shaikh's commentary provides a critique of survey design employed by prominent nonprofit data-collecting agencies on media use and its effects. It also offers ways forward, with the goal of more accurately capturing the political role of new and legacy media around the globe. Similarly, Alex T. Williams' essay proposes a communications-based intervention to raise public awareness of the journalism crisis. It documents new measures that the author developed while at the Pew Research Center to better capture and communicate the scope of the crisis for the public, applying insights from communications to articulate the problem and a potential solution.

The contributors also make theoretical interventions that highlight ways to reconsider current policy challenges. For instance, Brice Nixon makes the case for examining issues related to digital media, such as Internet regulation, copyright, and advertising, through the lens of digital labor. This approach foregrounds important questions about the distribution of communicative power, the exploitation of digital media user labor, and corporate strategies determining digital consumption in the service of maximal value extraction. Matt Reichel's essay also draws attention to structural power relations, exploring how they operate through the discourse of "privacy rights." He argues that exclusions embedded in the privacy regime reflect existing sociocultural divides, as privacy rights are often denied to marginalized communities in the service of social control and capital accumulation. Opeyemi Akanbi's contribution explores how Fortune 500 companies' privacy policies fail to reflect the blurring of boundaries between work and private uses of technology by employees. Her analysis reveals that many employees are subject to corporate monitoring when not working. Drawing on nuanced theoretical accounts of privacy, she proposes concrete steps for reformulating such privacy policies so they more accurately reflect the way privacy operates at the intersections of work and personal life.

Finally, the commentaries in this Special Section also suggest novel approaches and applications of insights from the field of communications to other contexts. For instance, Jillian Kwong's commentary emphasizes the role that communication research can play in addressing the shortcomings of the implementation of behavioral and social science reforms in medical curricula to promote better doctor–patient encounters and relationships. Thus, combining concrete policy recommendations, theoretical

interventions, and novel applications, the work in this Special Section reveals the possibilities emerging from the encounter between communication research and policy-making practice.

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