

Wonkish Populism in Media Advocacy and Net Neutrality Policy Making

DANNY KIMBALL¹
Goucher College, USA

This article identifies a discursive tactic in media policy advocacy it calls *wonkish populism* and describes some of its features and operations as evident in the net neutrality debates. Wonkish populism is an advocacy technique that entails public participation in arcane regulatory procedures, with rhetoric antagonistic to establishment structures but steeped in policy minutia. Media policy advocates have used wonkish populism to stimulate mass participation in bureaucratic processes like rulemaking proceedings with language and practices that connect collective opposition to concentrated power with regulatory specificity that gains traction in the policy sphere. This article critically examines the U.S. Federal Communications Commission's Open Internet policy-making process to illustrate wonkish populism in net neutrality advocates' linkage of the terms and processes of policy insiders with the values and actions of political outsiders.

Keywords: Federal Communications Commission, media advocacy, media policy, net neutrality, populism

The Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) 2015 Open Internet rules that prevent broadband providers from discriminating among Internet traffic were the result of a decade-long debate in the United States over net neutrality, the principle of openness and equality informing the policy. (This article will not go into detail on the workings of net neutrality in order to focus on the policy advocacy around the issue. I have offered explanations of the technical, industrial, and regulatory aspects of net neutrality for a media studies audience elsewhere—Kimball, 2014.) Battle for the Net, a coalition of media advocacy groups that led the campaign for net neutrality policy in 2015, described the debate this way: "They are Team Cable . . . the most hated companies in America. . . . If they win, the Internet dies . . . We are Team Internet. . . . We believe in the free and open Internet" (Battle for the Net, 2014). Presenting the FCC's Open Internet rulemaking as a stark, high-stakes "battle" of two opposing teams

Danny Kimball: danny.kimball@goucher.edu

Date submitted; 2015-09-10

¹ Many thanks to Becky Lentz, Allison Perlman, and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and guidance on this article; Jennifer Holt, Michele Hilmes, Jeremy Wade Morris, Kristin Eschenfelder, and Jonathan Gray for useful feedback on earlier versions of this research; and Stephanie Wagoner Kimball for helpful discussions, refining, and support.

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lines up with the populist rhetoric common of contemporaneous anticorporate social movements. But Battle for the Net elaborated on what the net neutrality advocates of "Team Internet" were fighting for with a far-from-standard rallying cry: "We stand for 'Title II reclassification'" (Battle for the Net, 2014). This is the terminology of policy wonks, referencing the obscure FCC process necessary to mandate nondiscrimination on broadband providers, the crucial change that had to be made for enforceable net neutrality protections. The goal of this article is to shed light on this unlikely amalgam in advocacy language and practice, with a focus on the net neutrality debates and what it can explicate about the strategies, tactics, and labor of media advocacy.

In two related campaigns from 2009 to 2015, media advocacy groups mobilized millions of everyday people to engage in the FCC's Open Internet policy-making proceeding alongside the lawyers, lobbyists, and technical experts that normally dominate this typically hidden domain. This was a crucial aspect of what leaders from Free Press, the public interest organization at the forefront of the pro-net-neutrality campaign, have referred to as their "outside-in" strategy (Aaron & Karr, 2016), mobilizing public participation that was key to moving the needle toward stronger net neutrality rules (Faris, Roberts, Etling, Othman, & Benkler, 2015). Indeed, the campaigns for net neutrality were successful: The FCC's 2015 Open Internet Order implemented clear nondiscrimination protections, rooted in a robust foundation of statutory authority, for fixed and mobile broadband, delivering on nearly everything that advocates were pushing for (FCC, 2015).

This article will uncover a bit of the longer history behind the rules, by looking at the debate surrounding the FCC's first Open Internet proceeding from 2009–2010, which was seen by net neutrality supporters as a failure for resulting in weak rules that ended up struck down in court, but actually laid crucial discursive and organizational groundwork for the 2015 policy (FCC, 2009–2010). In particular, I will concentrate on public participation in the rulemaking process through submissions to the official public comment record and how this was shaped by advocacy groups. Scholarship on the net neutrality debates (as opposed to the copious amount of legal, economic, and technical research that figured into the debates themselves) has explored the issue at the level of the larger-scale policy process (Hart, 2011), mainstream media coverage (Kim, Chung, & Kim, 2011), online discussions (Herman & Kim, 2014; Lee, Sang, & Xu, 2015), and individual stakeholder representations (Ly, MacDonald, & Toze, 2012), but little has dug into specific advocacy tactics or drilled into public comments in the FCC's Open Internet proceedings. Beyond the immediate issue of net neutrality, though, I also wish to build on and add to the growing body of research on media advocacy and activism, particularly focused on the postmillennium "media reform" movement (see Dunbar-Hester, 2014a; Freedman, Obar, Martens, & McChesney, 2016; Hackett & Carroll, 2006; McChesney, 2004, 2007; Mueller, Pagé, & Keurbis, 2004; Napoli, 2008; Shade, 2011). In particular, this article will illuminate an element of media advocacy work—*wonkish populism*—that has gone underexamined and will deepen critical perspective on the dynamics of public participation in policy-making discourse.

In this article, I identify a discursive tactic in media policy advocacy that I call *wonkish populism* and describe some of its features and operations as evident in the net neutrality debates. Specifically, I examine the work of interest groups and publics that participated in the FCC's Open Internet rulemaking proceeding from 2009–2010 to demonstrate how they linked the language and processes of policy

“insiders” with the values and actions of policy “outsiders.” In this way, wonkish populism entails public participation in arcane administrative procedures, with rhetoric antagonistic to establishment structures, but steeped in policy minutia. As a discursive tactic in media policy advocacy, wonkish populism has been used by interest groups to stimulate mass participation in bureaucratic processes like FCC proceedings with messages and activities that connect collective opposition to concentrated power with regulatory specificity that gains traction in the policy sphere.

I understand policy making not as a neutral, rational system of defining problems and formulating solutions, but as a messy struggle for power within larger social structures of inequality. This perspective draws from critical policy studies, a growing field of scholarship that places policy making within larger political context and works to reveal and assess the interests and values that operate within the language and actions of stakeholders in the policy-making process (see Fischer, Torperson, Durnova, & Orsini, 2016). This article joins critical policy studies in “rejecting the prevailing model of elitist, technocratic liberal democracy . . . [to] offer support for projects designed to further processes of democratization” (Fischer et al., 2016, p. 8). From this perspective, critical scholars have pushed for greater public participation in policy making, to break through the “technical mystique . . . enveloping experts with a misleading aura of objective rationality” (Fischer et al., 2016, p. 7). This is not to undermine expertise itself, but rather to recognize the elitist structures privileging traditional experts like lawyers, technologists, and think-tank analysts, and empower the personal and collective counterexpertise of public interest advocates, social movements, and publics to challenge embedded power relations.

Consistent with this perspective, this article seeks to shed light on advocacy practices working to develop productive links between participation and expertise in media policy making, to make room for publics in the policy sphere, cultivate the literacies necessary for everyday people to make meaningful contributions to technical decisions, and legitimize more antagonistic intervention on behalf of populist interests. There is surprisingly little from emerging critical approaches to media policy that engages with critical policy studies, despite much shared affinity between these perspectives, including critiques of elite power structures, problematization of the false dichotomy between “politics” and “policy,” calls for more public participation in policy-making processes, and a focus on advocacy and activist work (see, e.g., Dunbar-Hester, 2013, 2014b; Freedman, 2008; Gangadharan, 2009, 2013a, 2013b; Hackett & Carroll, 2006; Lentz, 2011, 2013; McChesney, 2007; Perlman, 2016b; Pickard, 2014; Streeter, 1996, 2013).

My approach to media policy is rooted in discourse theory. Within critical policy studies, discourse theory has been used as a lens through which to examine, for instance, environmental, transportation, education, and urban policy (see Fischer et al., 2016), and has grown prominent as a theoretical basis for media policy studies, as well (see Streeter, 2013). Several varieties of discourse theory have been used to critically explore policy making—most prominently, Fairclough’s (2013) critical discourse analysis and what Howarth (2009) calls poststructuralist discourse theory. The understanding of discourse that grounds this article is based in poststructuralist discourse theory, as described by Howarth (2000, 2009), stemming from Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) augmentation of Foucault’s conception of discourse with Gramsci’s view of hegemony. In particular, for Howarth (2000), following Laclau and Mouffe, discourse is an articulatory practice (pp. 1–15)—power is constituted in a hegemonic process of linking together different terms and practices into discourse coalitions.

In studying the operations of wonkish populism, I concentrate here on public engagement with net neutrality from 2009–2010 and how it was shaped through media advocacy work. For evidence through which to illustrate examples of wonkish populist discourse, I draw from the official public record in the FCC’s Open Internet proceeding submitted via both the electronic comment filing system (ECFS; FCC, 2009–2010) and the agency’s experimental IdeaScale online discussion platform (IdeaScale, 2009–2010a). I also put these texts in context with advocacy messaging from interest-group websites and e-mail messages, as well as online publications and television programming impacted in these campaigns. I focus on the “Save the Internet” campaign led by Free Press—the progressive media advocacy group at the center of the contemporary media reform movement (see McChesney, 2007)—which organized a coalition of hundreds of groups and millions of citizens to push for net neutrality.

This article proceeds in three sections. The first provides some explanation of wonkish populism and how it operates. The second illustrates the concept with examples from citizen engagement driven by net neutrality advocacy to the FCC’s 2009–2010 Open Internet rulemaking process. The third offers some closing thoughts on wonkish populism and attendant consequences, responsibilities, and conditions that accompany it.

What Is Wonkish Populism?

Advocacy work in the net neutrality debates shows discourse bridging the rhetoric of policy insiders and political outsiders. *Wonkish populism* is a media advocacy technique that links elements of technocratic and democratic discourse. It is wonkish in the spaces in which it facilitates intervention (policy-making proceedings in regulatory agencies like the FCC) and the language it deploys (technical jargon and specific policy details). It is populist in organization (connecting with everyday people in/as publics) and orientation (posing demands as in the interest of common people).

Wonkish populism differs from more straightforward forms of protest, where public demonstrations communicate disapproval to decision makers in means that maximize the clarity and scale of demands. Although the collective action logic of mobilizing people at the grassroots level remains, wonkish populist advocates ask something different of publics: engaging in the language and spaces typically dominated by experts, developing and deploying skills and literacies meaningful to affect the change they demand. Wonkishness involves a particularity and detail-focused emphasis on understanding the policy under discussion, or at least a sufficient appearance of fluency. However, the attention is not purely on making the right argument, in the right words, to the right people—part of the political force still comes from the sheer numbers of participants and their collective organization and expression. The trick for advocacy campaigns employing this strategy is to formulate collective demands that connect the values and interests of publics to rhetoric that carries weight in the policy sphere—it is an articulation (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) of typically disparate discursive elements.

Wonkish populism is a particular mode of participation, a means through which public engagement with policy-making processes is shaped. The populist element has been present in many influential postmillennium movements such as Occupy, but bringing this political energy and attention to wonkish ways of engaging is the difference—ways to bring everyday people into policy processes that

typically exclude them, discursively and materially. The advocacy work being done here is building the rhetorical and organizational scaffolding for people to use in their engagement. This discourse does not come from "the people" in some idealized authentic way, but neither is it entirely top down. Rather it is an intermediate-level intervention and mediation between positions. It serves as a way of legitimizing popular demands, both in the terms of collective action and in going beyond sheer numbers to rational argumentation.

"Wonkish" refers to the obsessive attention to minute details associated with "policy wonks." The use of tedious legal jargon is an integral part of the "Beltway interpretive community" of regulatory administration (Streeter, 1996), an exclusionary function that contributes to the construction of policymaking processes as "boring" to publics (Freedman, 2008; Holt, 2014; Lentz, 2009; Napoli, 2008). Shared language, assumptions, and norms within the policy sphere include a rationalized insistence on empiricism and evidence-based reasoning. Understanding of this language, as well as the processes, principles, and institutions that it operates within, is not distributed widely, especially in regard to the administrative agencies that often escape the view of even many political activists and politics junkies. Wonkish close attention to the use of language and concern with the politics of expertise is related to longstanding motivations behind critical policy studies and its founding concern with a problematic capitulation to elitist, antidemocratic technocracy. It also aligns with Lentz's calls for "media policy literacy" (2014, 2016) as a foundation for effective media advocacy, echoed in what Perlman (2016a) refers to as the "informational literacies necessary to be credible stakeholders" in policy-making processes (p. 186). Wonkishness signals a commitment to a rigorous and sophisticated understanding and discussion of an issue, but does not necessarily assume that such contributions must be limited to only elite, established experts—infused with a more populist orientation, it can be a more inclusive tool.

Populism is understood here not through the typical definition as "support for the concerns of ordinary people" ("Populism," 2016) but rather through concepts developed by Laclau (2005). Laclau theorizes populism in terms of "radical democracy" to reclaim it from a denigrated status rooted in fears of "mob mentality" and "mass hysteria"—as well as demagogues' manipulations of base tendencies—and challenges the antidemocratic inclinations underlying suspicions of populist politics (Laclau, 2005, pp. 1–64). Laclau's (2005) conception of populism differs from its mainstream understanding primarily in that he defines it not through content but form: Populism for Laclau is not a political ideology but a political logic. In this sense, populism brings diverse groups together by emphasizing their shared struggles against an institutionalized other—it is a hegemonic process which discursively constructs a political identity of "the people" by articulating heterogeneous demands in antagonism to existing power structures.

Two necessary parts of this populist process for Laclau (2005, pp. 67–124) are the definition of a common enemy—discursively constructing a collective identity of "us," in opposition to "them"—and popular unification around blanket terms that can crystallize disparate demands—"empty signifiers" (such as "freedom" or "openness") that can mean enough different things to different people to get them to agree to it together (see also Lentz, 2013, for how "neutrality" has functioned as an empty signifier in the net neutrality debates). As a description of political interests, populism is incoherent, but as political strategy this imprecision is necessary. The time period here saw a resurgent populism following the financial crisis of 2007–2008, animating U.S. activism on the radical right in the Tea Party movement and

the radical left with the Occupy movement (and bringing momentum to the 2016 presidential campaigns of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, respectively).

The wonkish variety of populism operates by making claims on behalf of “the people,” but doing it in terms and processes typically not for “the people”—channeling wonkishness to show the populist stakes of obscure policy battles. Contrasting popular demands against those of a common enemy—like corporations, the rich, or government—brings in everyone else who is not directly aligned or implicated with powerful elites, an effective way to hail the many. It is not enough, however, to rely on a pure numbers game, because to intervene in policy making takes advocates helping publics make an argument in the rationalist terms that move forward in such a space. Wonkish terminology may be necessary, but advocates infusing this with populist sensibility can connect public values and personal experiences (empty signifiers like “freedom” and “openness”) alongside more opaque jargon (“Title II reclassification”).

Wonkish and populist discourses were articulated together in the net neutrality case to form an unlikely but ultimately powerful rhetorical fusion. Lofty ideals of freedom at stake with net neutrality were fought for in the weeds of regulatory technicalities and public participation in the policy-making process often invoked an air of vernacular wonkish expertise on technology, economics, and policy. This did not arise naturally, though, but was the result of the rhetorical strategy of net neutrality activists. Advocates’ labor shaped the anger and frustration of publics into texts and practices that carried weight in the policy sphere, where it needed to go to be effective. What is different about wonkish populism is how it more fully brings nonexperts into previously expert-driven processes.

The dynamics of wonkish populism described here are not new or unique to the net neutrality debates, but rather build on many longstanding strategies and tactics in advocacy and activism and articulate them together in new ways. As Perlman (2016a) reminds us, media advocacy is a cumulative process, taking constant work, growth, and development in a series of campaigns to make social change. Indeed, in her history of U.S. broadcasting advocacy campaigns, Perlman (2016b) shows how public participation in media policy-making processes throughout the 20th century depended on the distribution of “informational capital” to show supporters the consequences of unfamiliar policy issues on them (see also Dunbar-Hester, 2013; McChesney, 2007; Obar & Schejter 2010; Pickard, 2014). This was instigated and driven by information and training, through tool kits, newsletters, and websites, teaching about citizens’ rights and how media issues affect them. Further study is needed to more fully develop an understanding of wonkish populism in historical public participation in media policy battles, but there are clearly precedents for the net neutrality case I use as an example in this article. The net neutrality debates simply show this technique in a more visible and widely participatory form.

The most relevant historical precedent of populist engagement with wonkish media policy is the media ownership debates of 2002–2007. Resistance to the FCC’s push to relax media ownership caps starting in 2002 was a formative moment for the contemporary U.S. media reform movement, which succeeded in getting everyday citizens to understand, pay attention to, and engage in crucial but otherwise obscured bureaucratic battles and grew into a populist social movement (McChesney, 2004, 2007). Think tanks and public interest advocates had long fought around media policy inside the Beltway, but advocacy groups that developed during this era (notably including Free Press) positioned themselves

as go-betweens for organizing citizens at the grassroots level while also working insider angles (the institutional resources available to particular groups strongly enables and shapes this positioning—see Lentz’s interview in this Special Section).

The specific tactic of mobilizing people to submit comments to FCC rulemaking proceedings—especially through templates, form letters, and mass filings facilitated online—resulted in millions of voices overwhelming the FCC’s public comment record in the media ownership proceedings of 2003 and 2007. Nonetheless, these voices were largely ignored, and the FCC ultimately deregulated media ownership over the objections of millions—the result of friction in the modes of populism and policy wonks. Public participation is a basic tactic of grassroots political organizing—large numbers of people visibly supporting a cause is the most powerful weapon advocates have in the face of concentrated material resources in opposition, demonstrably expressing popular will that cannot be ignored. The independent expert-based policy sphere of media regulation is not a democratic system, though, and such populism can backfire if not sufficiently wonkish. The valuing of technocratic expertise in the policy sphere meant media ownership regulatory processes structured in ways exclusionary to regular citizens (Obar & Schejter, 2010) and a definition of the issue in economic terms limiting to public participation (Blevins & Brown, 2006). Most notably, public comments were largely dismissed as outside the bounds of objective evidence-based regulatory discourse the policy sphere demands (Gangadharan, 2013b). In spite of eventual deregulation in the media ownership case, media reform advocates established mass public participation as a viable strategy for pressuring the FCC. Facilitating public comments was a key tactic for (and against) net neutrality, but, responding to the limitations of purely populist participation in an administrative policy space, advocates sought to rhetorically ground it in understanding of policy details—a valuable lesson that played into the examples below.

Wonkish Populism in FCC Open Internet Policy Making

For an evocative example of wonkish populism in practice, I will focus now on selections of discourse in and surrounding the official public comment record in the FCC’s Open Internet rulemaking from 2009–2010. The tactics employed in the Save the Internet campaign built on the model of the media ownership campaign: mobilize publics to submit comments to the FCC en masse. However, it also worked to meet the official proceeding’s requirements of rationalized policy discourse by infusing this populist fire with cold technical jargon. The first set of examples come from posts on IdeaScale, a crowdsourced online discussion platform hosted on the FCC’s OpenInternet.gov site that served as an informal but official space for participation in the policy-making process (FCC, 2010). The second is from submissions through the FCC’s ECFS. The following illustrations demonstrate how net neutrality advocacy combined populist and wonkish discursive elements to inform and mobilize people to engage with the issue.

IdeaScale and “Real Net Neutrality”

Anti-elite antagonism and technical details showed up in the comments of everyday citizens, a wonkish populism influenced by net neutrality advocates. Supporters brought together shared antagonisms of “the people” against powerful corporations through language leaning on rationalist legitimations. Arguments for net neutrality on IdeaScale typically posed the issue as an example of

government intervention to protect “the people” against dominant corporate power. Representative of this populist sentiment is this comment: “Net Neutrality keeps the internet in the people’s hands. Something so powerful should not be given up to corporate America. Bottom line. Net Neutrality = good for the people” (Notsunil, 2009). Many users discussed the Internet as a public resource that they feared would come under private corporate control unless the government intervened to protect equal access (e.g., see david.wyly, 2009; lanetteward, 2009). One user showed this perspective and separated it from any notion of government control over the Internet in a post titled “Net Neutrality = No one telling you what you can and cannot do on the web”: “The only people who would be against net neutral legislation would be those who stand to lose money from it. Don’t let anyone tell you this is about the government controlling your internet. This is about companies trying to control your internet. Don’t let them” (david.ddrew, 2009). Also common was a defense of affirmative government regulation in the matter, such as in this submission titled “Net Neutrality Can Only Be Ensured Through Government Protection”:

The Federal Government has historical precedence of intervention when equal access to services is threatened. Vital to a democracy is the protection of the rights of marginalized and smaller groups. This includes the internet. This is not a question of the FCC governing the internet, but rather one of prevent [*sic*] a handful of corporations from access to it. (doormatt87, 2009)

Many comments on IdeaScale remained at the level of general principles, but some connected to specific policy proposals. “Freedom of speech” was the most common category for submissions, but it served as a floating signifier whose meaning differed on each side of the issue—showing the importance of connecting popular values to concrete precision within the policy-making process (IdeaScale, 2009–2010b). Some recognized this, such as the user who wrote, “Obviously we need to come up with a detailed technical language in order for this law to be effective, but the fundamental point remains that neutrality is crucial to the betterment of our access to information” (kuhlmann.andrew, 2009).

Such “detailed technical language” did enter into these submissions, but it did not arise spontaneously—the wonkish populism of public comments was influenced by prominent discursive intervention from the advocacy campaign led by Free Press. At the early point in the policy-making process when the IdeaScale discussions were most active, Free Press’s messaging was focused on explaining to supporters that the FCC’s Open Internet proposal was “fake net neutrality,” drawing wonkish attention to the loopholes that weakened the rules while driving many people to engage with the official proceeding (Karr, 2010). This was before the verdict in *Comcast v. FCC* (2010) made the issue of Title II reclassification especially urgent: the DC Circuit Court of Appeals struck down the FCC’s first attempt at Open Internet policy, ruling that the FCC did not have the authority to regulate the network management practices of broadband providers because they were, at that time, classified as Title I information services, for which the Commission has very limited oversight capacity. Following this (and the similar outcome of *Verizon v. FCC*, 2014), net neutrality advocates—and eventually the FCC itself—shifted focus to the issue of reclassifying broadband providers as Title II telecommunications services, over which the FCC has greater authority to regulate. Many submissions on IdeaScale reflected the influence of Free Press, as rhetorical patterns such as “public interest over corporate power” in the comments parallel the way the issue was framed in progressive political publications that share connections with Free Press (e.g., Nichols,

2010; Silver, 2010).

The top-voted IdeaScale post followed these same lines. It was actually a meta-comment on wide public participation in the Open Internet proceeding, basing its argument purely on popular support for net neutrality and against corporate power: "The public demands the strongest Network Neutrality rule possible, without loopholes. Millions of Americans have called for nothing less, and now the FCC must act decisively, putting the public interest first and not giving in to pressure from AT&T, Comcast, Verizon and their lobbyists" (tkarr, 2009). This user was Tim Karr, the net neutrality campaign director at Free Press and coordinator of the Save the Internet coalition.

Appealing to specific objective "facts" to "explain what net neutrality really is" was a common wonkish tendency of IdeaScale comments. Many net neutrality supporters equated opposition to ignorance (sometimes willful) and took a didactic tone toward explaining what the proposed Open Internet rules actually said. For instance, a net neutrality supporter characterized an opponent as either "entirely uninformed and ignorant or intentionally trying to mislead people" and proceeded to spell out provisions of the proposed policy before saying, "if you know of a SPECIFIC item in proposal [that intrudes on free speech], bring it up here, don't hand wave at it" (metasoarous, 2009). Other empirical leanings in support of net neutrality presented U.S. regulatory history and the technical workings of the Internet, bringing in detailed discussions ranging from democratic theory to network protocols and infrastructures (e.g., doormatt87, 2009; Kliman, 2009; pangasamaneesh, 2010).

ECFS and "Reclassification"

ECFS submissions for the 2009–2010 Open Internet proceeding were dominated by Free Press supporters whose comments were filed with the FCC by clicking through an automated submission setup. Many of these comments showed significant correlation with the Free Press post on IdeaScale discussed above, calling on the FCC to "stand with us" and "protect Net Neutrality by enacting strong rules" (e.g., Andrew, January 6, 2010, and thousands of other comments sharing this exact text). The wonkish populism of this pro-net-neutrality discourse underpinned Free Press's call for stronger nondiscrimination protections and closed loopholes within its initial briefs and comments upon the proposal's release.

Later, following the *Comcast* decision that exposed how limited the FCC's authority over broadband providers was under the Title I classification of that time, Free Press's focus shifted to reclassification of broadband as a Title II telecommunications service. In addition to petitions signed by nearly 2 million people hand delivered by Free Press staffers to FCC offices, the group facilitated the filing of tens of thousands of comments arguing that "real net neutrality" could only come through reclassification (Perez Truedson, 2010). This message had to be carefully crafted, balancing the need to relay grassroots "demands of the people" with leveraging the wonkish words of Title II of the Communications Act through those people. The thousands of comments submitted via Free Press that focused on reclassification spoke in the first person in opposition to corporate control and connected personal experience to a call for reclassification:

I rely on the Internet as a public platform for free speech, equal opportunity, economic growth and innovation. Without vital Net Neutrality protections, companies like Verizon and Comcast . . . can decide whether I will have a voice online. These companies should not have the power to determine my fate on the Internet. . . . The agency must stand with the public and protect consumer access to the most important communications medium of our time. Please reclassify broadband as a “telecommunications service” and keep the Internet open and free of corporate gatekeepers. (Brook, 2010)

While emphasizing the public resource that Internet infrastructure would be under a Title II common carriage model, the public comments that Free Press facilitated carefully avoided the controversial terminology of “public utility,” which was read as dangerous socialism by the opposition campaign.

Especially in the wake of the *Comcast* decision, when the battleground shifted to the definition of broadband itself, Free Press wholeheartedly embraced wonkish populism. The group made a pivot in its public engagement efforts from slogans like “real net neutrality” into education and mobilization efforts based on the specific regulatory details of FCC classifications. With Free Press egging it on, “reclassification” became an unlikely rallying cry of concerned citizens, showing up in online discussions and in hundreds of thousands of demands issued to the FCC (Riley, 2010). Free Press recounted and explained the history and terminology behind the FCC’s classification decisions to clarify the issue and its importance to net neutrality. *Ars Technica* noted the outcome of this work, and the degree of difficulty in this feat: “Debates about Title II of the Communications Act don’t often make it into the op-ed pages of the *New York Times*. The fact that they did so in the past several days shows just how invested in arcane regulatory issues the public has become when it comes to the Internet” (Anderson, 2010, para. 1). Even as it acknowledged that it was shifting the public debate onto the rarefied turf of insider regulatory lingo, Free Press pressed on for reclassification as its primary strategy at both the grassroots and insider levels. The Save the Internet coalition addressed FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski on behalf of the people in an open letter it called “Just Do It, Julius,” saying:

Nearly 250,000 people have urg[ed] you to protect the Internet by “reclassifying” broadband under Title II of the Communications Act. And yes, we know what “reclassify” means. But does the FCC know what it means when this many people are speaking out about an incredibly nuanced, seemingly wonky issues [*sic*]? Let me tell you: It means that we care, deeply, about the future of the Internet. (Tady, 2010, paras. 2–3)

People may not need to understand technical jargon to demand an “open Internet” in principle, but they do need to know enough about the nitty-gritty to make an impact at the FCC and to understand whether they have actually had their demands fulfilled or—as was the case in 2010—not.

Discussion and Conclusions

I will conclude by offering three thoughts on wonkish populism, based on examples from the net neutrality debates at the FCC traced above, but considered in the broader context. I will first note how wonkish populism can be used toward any political project, then discuss the mediating role of advocacy

groups, and finally mention the affordances of digital media in these dynamics, with a focus on some consequences, responsibilities, and conditions that come with this. These brief comments are meant to highlight some points that can be taken away from the net neutrality case in particular and suggest some ways in which the concept of wonkish populism may be developed further in general.

First, wonkish populism, like Laclau's populism generally, is ideologically neutral—in some cases “the people” oppose corporations, in others government—and this comes with consequences. Wonkish populism was also used against net neutrality, especially in the sizable campaign organized by Americans for Prosperity (AFP, the right-libertarian group founded by David and Charles Koch). With rhetoric of “the people” standing against the government, AFP also facilitated mass public comments in the 2009–2010 Open Internet rulemaking, but claimed grassroots support for a “free-market Internet” and against “socialist” government control (e.g., Kerpen, 2010; N Chupp, 2010). Examples from the AFP campaign show manipulation of wonkish populism, especially as it can be easy to misrepresent or outright fabricate technical details about policies that are not readily understood outside circles of relevant expertise. Some comments opposing net neutrality pointed to technical underpinnings to present their argument as seemingly indisputable, but many couched their explanations in the “laws of economics,” citing market fundamentalist imperatives to limit government intervention (e.g., comguru, 2010; unsubscribe, 2010). Appealing to the “laws” of free market economics as if they are laws of nature is so thoroughly filtered through the ideological belief system of neoliberalism as to siphon out practically any actual policy details.

A particular danger of carelessness with or cynical exploitation of this dynamic can be seen in the conspiracy-theoretical leanings of many net neutrality opponents, which simply applied a thin gloss of wonkishness to long-standing populist distrust of government. A theme common to both sides' comments was that, upon digging deeper, the proposed policy was not actually what it seemed, but AFP explained its position as exposing a surreptitious government power grab. During its campaign, AFP's “government takeover of the Internet” rhetoric circulated in conservative media and was deployed in many public comments opposing net neutrality that veered closer to conspiracy theories—a kind of counterfeit wonkishness where deep investigation turns up detailed but entirely false explanations (e.g., Stackla, 2009; t.c.lehner, 2009; see also Spafford, 2013). Glenn Beck brought this discourse to his Fox News television program courtesy of AFP, pointing his viewers to the group's NoInternetTakeover.com website through which to submit FCC comments and thanking the campaign's leader by name on-air for “alerting” him to the issue (Beck, 2010). (Beck is a kind of aspirationally wonkish populist—a self-educated, antigovernment “man of the people,” with an abstruse professorial air.) Equating federal regulation of broadband infrastructure with “government takeover of the Internet” goes beyond a merely hyperbolic interpretation of a policy by a well-meaning opposition, into a dangerous distortion of the issue.

Wonkishness should not be mistaken for the mere appearance of technical expertise or appeal to a false sense of intellectual authority, nor should a linkage with populism shade it too far toward demagoguery. Advocates' use of wonkish populist discourse, therefore, comes with a special ethical responsibility to faithfully represent the policy matters at hand in their public explanations. There is inevitably a certain amount of simplification that comes with advocates informing nonexpert publics on complex policy issues, with the necessity to make it salient to peoples' lives and motivating them to act on it, but this can get stretched even thinner when dealing with the esoteric terminology of policy wonks.

Attempting wonkish populism takes a certain mode of engagement—detailed, but aimed at everyday people—and just like any advocacy tactic, it can be employed for any side, for any issue. However, true wonkishness has to be based in actual policy details—we can draw the line at conspiracy theories, which more than anything, ape the look and feel of wonkishness without the rigor or the truth.

Second, there is an important mediating role for advocacy groups in wonkish populism. If asking everyday people to be this engaged with policy details means arguments over what the policy in question “really” is, then advocates’ explanations are especially powerful in shaping peoples’ understandings. While we ought to encourage greater public participation in policy making, the sheer complexity of issues at hand, and especially the technical nature of much media policy, necessitates a certain degree of delegation of decision-making authority from publics to experts. People need to have a certain grasp of the issue and how it plays out in specific provision of the policy, but at the same time they do not necessarily need to know everything about how it works—understanding the basic dynamics of the policy and how to meaningfully express public opinion is the crucial threshold. The particular mechanics of how the policy operates can be reserved for those whose job it is to operate them—there are diminishing returns to the expected level of knowledge for public participation in policy debates.

We should not, however, dismiss the importance of publics’ grasp of the technicalities of media policy making, as we can see in the net neutrality example how a certain depth of understanding was necessary to know if their demands had actually been met. If technical, though, it need not be technocratic—it is not enough to just leave it up to experts to decide what is best, because policy is also political. The net neutrality example demonstrates how part of the value of a deeper level of policy understanding is for publics to be able to know if they are getting what they want—policy makers can claim that they have delivered protections for internet openness, but to go beyond slogans and get into details makes publics better able to hold them accountable.

Ultimately, the most important role for publics to play is to issue demands that clearly express their values and interests, with advocacy groups to help formulate, organize, and amplify these to reach policy makers. How these values are connected to concrete policy specifics is tricky and takes people who understand both these and the complexities of the technical issues at hand. A certain division of labor is necessary in policy decision making, but we ought to do it in a way that does not privilege elitist experts at the expense of other voices in the process—by opening up wonkishness to a more populist orientation and arming everyday people with what they need to make contributions at previously obscured levels of policy decisions, we may allow more peer relations among participants, avoiding shallow arguments from authority, but nonetheless leaving existing dangers of falling into the trap of technocratic perspective.

Breaking down barriers that insulate bureaucrats from the people their decisions affect for more shared participation in policy-making processes takes people being able to engage more fully in the technical workings of policy specifics, and so important intervention from advocacy groups. Gangadharan’s (2013a, 2013b) conception of “translation” in media policymaking usefully describes the mediation between advocacy groups and publics: interest groups inform, bring together, and amplify the message of publics, especially relevant for wonkish populism for how these groups put demands in terms meaningful in the policy sphere. With wonkish populism, advocates must create understanding of an issue

for people, shape the discourse, relay the message, even speak for them—all while not falling into overly rationalized discourse that perpetuates power imbalances—by mobilizing not just better arguments but larger numbers of people making those arguments.

Third, I must mention the affordances of digital media and other conditions enabling these dynamics. Wonkish populism is not new and has many historical antecedents, but digital networked technologies do make its operations easier. The most obvious of these differences is that information on policy-making proceedings and the ability to submit comments to the public record are made more accessible through agency websites and ECFs. Digital media also provide greater access to information about policy issues generally and tools for reaching out to and organizing publics, seen in the robust and influential online discussions of net neutrality (Herman & Kim, 2014). Technological developments alone did not create the conditions for wonkish populism to thrive in the Open Internet proceeding, though, but rather combined with institutional cultural changes and the fruits of advocate labor to get more people informed and involved in policymaking processes.

By 2009, online social media had become an important platform for political discussions, pressure from the media reform movement for more inclusive and participatory rulemaking processes had reached an inflection point, and President Obama had come into office promising a more transparent and accountable federal government. Following from this, the FCC began to move toward more openness and public engagement in rulemaking processes, including more social media outreach, dedicated information portals on particular proceedings like OpenInternet.gov, and experiments with online discussion platforms like IdeaScale that provide informal yet official spaces for public comments. This amounted to attempts to meet publics halfway, not requiring them to wade too far into the unfamiliar territory of the proceeding, like the ECFs, but also not reaching out to where people were already discussing the issue online or doing much to ease the policy-making proceeding's restrictive bounds of official rationalized policy discourse.

As the net neutrality campaign developed, toward the eventual 2015 Open Internet rules, the organizing began to operate more at the grassroots—or netroots—level, with more participatory public engagement through hybrid online–offline demonstrations and more direct popular expression that could not be dismissed as mere clicktivism. For instance, the public comment record for the 2014–2015 Open Internet rulemaking was remarkable not just for sheer numbers, but such an unusually high percentage of original comments and not canned form letters (Lannon & Pendleton, 2014). Net neutrality advocates still facilitated mass comment filings, but encouraged people to add to, modify, and rearrange boilerplate comment text or sometimes even a blank box to fill in themselves (Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2014; Free Press, 2014). This represents a particularly promising aspect of wonkish populism in that it thoroughly motivated people to put their own voices into the mix and was harder to dismiss by showing people's understanding and substantive arguments.

In-depth critical scholarly investigation of 2014–2015 net neutrality advocacy and discourse is still needed, but preliminary observations show evidence that the discursive practices of wonkish populism only further intensified. Net neutrality advocates pulled off the delicate articulation of wonkish populism and prevailed by 2015 with a compelling combination of anticorporate rhetoric that resonated publicly and credibly detailed arguments that made traction in policymaking. Even if this public participation was

sidelined in the 2009–2010 process, by 2015 public voices were so numerous and so specific that their message could no longer be ignored.

In the 2014–2015 Open Internet rulemaking, the net neutrality campaign triumphed with a wonkish populism that showed the power of an informed populace banded together collectively toward a specific, defined policy goal. People demanded net neutrality not just in principle but all the way down to the wonkish policy details, like reclassification, that make it or break it in practice. It shows how effective advocacy can cue popular attention to and intervention in boring technical details, by showing relevance and importance to everyday experiences—undermining common sense by 2010 and proving it wrong by 2015. The masses infiltrated the previously sealed-off technocratic policy sphere, breaking through with a landmark victory and ruffling the feathers of elitist policy wonks trying to protect their turf (Atkinson, Castro, & McQuinn, 2015). This is something to build on, both the victory itself and the sense that the work of bringing people together around previously hidden complex issues can bring action and movement toward media democracy.

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