Moving Beyond Self-Castigation:

Let's Reinvigorate Communication Policy Research Now!

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Abstract

Communication policy researchers have eagerly joined communication scholars in continuing self-conscious debates regarding their theoretical status and practical significance. They have done so to the point of earnest self-castigation and by unjustly denigrating their work. Given the current critical junctures for communications, this research field cannot remain in this state. It is high time to move beyond self-castigation and reinvigorate communication policy research by acknowledging its much-needed voice, recognizing its merits, and highlighting areas in need of advance.

Keywords: communication policy, media policy, research traditions, history of the discipline, current status

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Moving Beyond Self-Castigation:

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For decades communication scholars have shown an awkward and relentless liking for self-analysis regarding their influence or lack of it, as strikingly exemplified by the preceding *Ferment in the Field* discussions in this journal. Communication policy researchers have eagerly joined in this chorus to the point of earnest self-castigation, mooting whether they were only theoretically practical, if at all, but practically irrelevant (Just & Puppis, 2012a). They have repeatedly and self-critically reassured themselves of their marginal contribution to communication policy-making, their lack of a real-world role (Noam, 1993), and their ceding of the field to other disciplines (Mueller, 1995; Bauer, Kim, Mody, & Wildman, 2005) – a sentiment that has been echoed both throughout the West and in developing countries (Das & Parthasarathi, 2011). Especially the consistently reiterated rift between administrative and critical research (Lazarsfeld, 1941) has sparked fruitless infighting and weakened the research field as a whole. In particular, this narrative helped fuel deceptive claims that communication policy research is mainly normative, non-empirical and descriptive, and consequently offers few insights for policy-makers. Altogether, undifferentiated generalized criticism has prevailed, obscuring much of communication policy research's wider merits and contributions. In particular, critical political economy has received an extensive share of criticism to the point of misrepresentation (Hardy, 2014), whereas more positivistic approaches have been more successful in depicting themselves as objective, impartial and value free. A latest example of this is Picard's (2016) selective account of the state of communication policy research, in which he rehashes the well-known accusations of it being disparate and incohesive, as well as weakened

by disciplinary narrowness and dogged normative preference. Such general and often

unsubstantiated criticism has been left unchallenged or similarly consented to, resulting in

apparent tacit acceptance and at the same time undeserved self-conscious states of mind.

Given the current critical junctures for communications (McChesney, 2009), this research field

cannot remain in this state. It is therefore high time to reinvigorate communication policy

research and move from self-consciousness to self-confidence (Just & Puppis 2012a) by

acknowledging its much-needed voice, recognizing its merits and highlighting where advances

are still imperative.

Knowledge for Critical Junctures

While the idea of researching communications policy dates back to the mid 19th century

(Braman, 2003c), it was only from the 1970s that one started to speak of a research field (Pool,

1974). This institutionalization was connected to a growing need for insights for policy-makers

due to technological, political and economic developments. In the following decades the changes

in the media and communications sector have further intensified with convergence (Latzer,

1998), liberalization (Gibbons & Humphreys, 2012) and globalization (Flew, 2007), giving way,

among other things, to transformations of media markets and concentration processes (Baker,

2007; Noam, 2009; Just, 2009) or new forms of governance like the delegation of regulatory

responsibilities from nation states to independent regulatory agencies, self-regulatory

organizations as well as to supra-, inter- and transnational fora (Drake & Wilson, 2008; Schulz,

Valcke, & Irion, 2013). Enormous changes in the communications sector are still continuing,

including the various policy, regulatory and economic challenges of the Internet age (Mueller,

2010; Mansell, 2012; Bauer & Latzer, 2016), for example the rise of global platforms (Bauer,

2014; Gillespie, 2010), the surveillance practices of the informational state (Braman, 2006), or

the growing governing power of technology/algorithms (Just & Latzer, 2016). These changes

also have significant implications for legacy media, including the role of public service media in

the era of the Internet (Burri, 2015; Iosifidis, 2010) and the future of journalism (Curran, 2010;

McChesney, 2008).

How all these developments unfold and how they will affect our societies will not least be

determined by crucial policy decisions (McChesney, 2009). Arguably, policy-makers and

regulators require scientific knowledge more than ever, and communication policy research may

offer a much-needed voice in policy debates. It can contribute to better-informed policy-making

(Braman, 2003a; Just & Puppis, 2012a) and help counter the rise of populism and authoritarian

politics by providing knowledge and showing alternative courses of action. There are sufficient

grounds for self-confidence for this pledge to be kept.

Grounds for Self-Confidence

Although it is often contested, there is a solid basis from which to build and many grounds for

self-confidence, as evidenced by the many enhancements that have occurred over the past four

decades since communication policy research has become more institutionalized. The conflicts

between administrative and critical research traditions that characterized the *Journal of

Communication*'s first "Ferment in the Field" of 1983 (Nordenstreng, 2004; Napoli & Friedland,

2016) have largely subsided. Only ten years later, fewer authors were calling for communication

policy scholars to engage more with policy-making (e.g., Noam, 1993). In 2005, then, Reinard

and Ortiz (2005) self-confidently asserted that the study of communication law and policy had

become an important area of research and theory in communication and matured to a point where

the criticism that such research is too problem-driven, descriptive, focused on regulations and

only slightly related to theory is gradually subsiding. Within the ICA (International

Communication Association), IAMCR (International Association for Media and Communication

Research) and ECREA (European Communication Research and Education Association)

specialist sections, divisions and working groups are focusing on policy issues, putting an

emphasis on theoretical and empirical work. In addition to individual studies, over the last ten

years a number of high-quality edited volumes have reinvigorated the field by pushing its

boundaries and strengthening its theoretical and methodological foundations (e.g., Donders,

Pauwels, & Loisen, 2014; Just & Puppis, 2012b; Löblich & Pfaff-Rüdiger, 2013; Mansell &

Raboy, 2011; Price, Verhulst, & Morgan, 2013; Simpson, Puppis, & Van den Bulck, 2016).

The field of communication policy research has thus made significant progress – a development

that would not have been possible without leaving "the turf wars" (Napoli & Friedland, 2016, p.

53) between administrative and critical research behind. There is now a consensus that the

separation into these two research traditions has often been misunderstood and overplayed. As a

matter of fact, Lazarsfeld's (1941) seminal essay can already be seen as a "peace-making

overture" (Katz & Katz, 2016, p. 9) and a "call for better integration of these research traditions"

(Napoli & Friedland, 2016, p. 42). Moreover, and unlike sometimes suggested, Lazarsfeld never

regarded the distinction as one between empirical and non-empirical research (Braman, 2003b).

Especially with regard to communication policy research, it can be argued that the distinction

between these traditions has always been blurred (Napoli & Friedland, 2016). If anything, they

mainly differ with respect to their selection of relevant problems and the questions asked at the

beginning of the research process in the context of discovery (Just & Puppis, 2012a), with a

significant difference lying "in the allegiance of researchers to the status quo versus change"

(Melody & Mansell, 1983, pp. 109-110). Some scholars, for instance, will attach greater value to economic freedom; others stress the importance of basic democratic values like the distribution of power (e.g., Baker, 2007). These value conflicts are mirrored in communication policy-making, which – due to the dual character of media as simultaneously economic and cultural goods – is inherently value-laden (Just, 2009), therefore making communication policy issues perhaps less amenable to straightforward, one-size-fits-all scholarly appraisal. But these conflicts can also lead to fruitful academic and policy debates, at least if scholars refrain from unsubstantiated attacks on each other's work and instead elaborate further on the field's theoretical and methodological foundations.

Reinvigorating Communication Policy Research

Reinvigorating communication policy research implies restoring its reputation by speaking up for it and acknowledging its merits and advances, but also pointing to areas where enhancements are still needed. As argued elsewhere (Just & Puppis, 2012a), this involves a detailed grounding in theories and methods as well as researching subjects that matter.

A *theory-driven approach* to communication policy research is essential. Despite some claims that the field remains weak in theoretical terms and ignorant of wider policy research (Picard, 2016), there are significant developments with respect to theory development and application. By both reassessing established approaches and reaching out to new ones that are not commonly used in communication policy research, the research field is now more connected with the larger body of social theory (McQuail, 1994), which is a prerequisite for investigating fundamental questions about media, communication and policy in contemporary societies (Fuchs, 2017). Scholars have increasingly come to make use of theories that can explain how interests,

institutions and ideas influence policy-making and its outcomes (e.g., contributions in Just &
Puppis, 2012b), and thus, for instance, apply critical theoretical approaches (e.g. Freedman,
2008), or variants of new institutionalism for understanding communication policy, politics and
polity, regulation and the emergence of new governance arrangements (Bannerman & Haggart,
2015; Latzer, Just, Saurwein, & Slominski, 2003; Puppis, 2010). Moreover, the impact of
convergence and growing complexity on communication policy strategies is assessed with
recourse to a combination of innovation, coevolution and complexity theories (Latzer, 2014).
Researchers also draw inspiration from critical regionalism (Ali, 2017), political philosophy
(Schejter & Tirosh, 2016), media history (Pickard, 2015; Zajácz, 2012), gender (Gallagher,
2011) and post-colonial studies (Alhassan & Chakravartty, 2011). Advancing theoretically
inevitably requires moving off the beaten paths and exploring new avenues from which insights
may be gained. What is required concurrently and what is largely missing, however, is a
discourse about the adequacy of certain theoretical approaches and their added value. An
example of such discourse is the discussion of the Western disciplinary roots and traditions of
communication research and concurrent calls for theories originating from other regions of the
world (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014; Wasserman & de Beer, 2009).

In order to be credible in academia and beyond, *methodological rigor* is similarly indispensable.
A few years ago we complained that – despite the field's self-conscious tradition –
methodological approaches are seldom explicated and discussions of methodological questions
are virtually non-existent (Just & Puppis, 2012a). The problem was never a lack of empirical
research but a lack of discussion, explanation and scrutiny of the methods of data collection and
data analysis used. This is increasingly being acknowledged by scholars and in more and more
articles, books and presentations they are putting an emphasis on their methodological

approaches. With articles focusing on the practicalities of interviews, document analysis and comparisons in communication policy research, the most frequently used methods in the field have received some much-deserved attention (Herzog & Ali, 2015; Karppinen & Moe, 2012; Puppis & d'Haenens, 2012). Further, a new handbook will be devoted exclusively to research methods (Van den Bulck, Puppis, Donders, & Van Audenhove, forthcoming). Despite such progress, it still cannot be taken for granted that studies will pay close attention to methods or that methods match research questions. A particular danger – afforded also by the new technical ease of (big) data collection – lies in following a quest for innovative approaches that are often not employed because of methodological necessity but because it is fashionable or "innovative" to do so. One of the biggest challenges for the field is therefore keeping up with new methods of studying the Internet and its policy implications while at the same time avoiding superficial analysis. Analyzing big data gathered from websites and social networks does indeed require new skills. However, "digital methods do not outdate but require traditional methods in order to avoid the pitfall of digital positivism" (Fuchs, 2017, p. 43).

As for choosing *subjects that matter*, scholars are faced with the difficulty that they need "to anticipate the pressing issues several years into the future" (Bauer et al., 2005, p. 21). In order to do research that affects people's everyday lives, it is pertinent to stay in touch with relevant actors and debates (Pickard, 2013). This involves talking to policy-makers, regulators and industry representatives, continuously monitoring the work of policy-making institutions and keeping track of developments that affect the media and communication industries as well as audiences in their roles as citizens and consumers. Technological, political, economic and social changes not only make it necessary to revisit old subjects, for example the role and transition of legacy media, the future of journalism as well as intellectual property or privacy, but also give

rise to new subjects that need attention, for example algorithms, the power of platforms, or net neutrality. Moreover, scholars should not simply stick with individual policies but keep track of the wider interlocking of economic, social and political powers that both underpin and are afforded by the operations of the media industries (McChesney, 2008; Freedman, 2014), including the new Internet players. Furthermore, there is a need to expand on issues of global media policy (Iosifidis, 2011; Mansell & Raboy, 2011; Raboy & Padovani, 2010), the understanding of media and political systems beyond the West (Curran & Park, 2000; Voltmer, 2012), and to scrutinize communication policy, development and democratization in countries of the global South (Flew, Iosifidis, & Steemers, 2016; Flew & Waisbord, 2015; Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014).

Make it so!

Evidently, communication policy research has reason to be more self-confident given the significant theoretical and methodological headway made when analyzing subjects both old and new. However, self-confidence should not foster self-delusion. As indicated above, a lot still needs to be done in order to continue the reinvigoration of the field with respect to theories, methods and subjects.

Scholars are increasingly trying to bring their findings into policy-making and by doing so, live up to Lasswell's (1970) definition of the policy sciences as both knowledge *of* the policy process as well as knowledge *in* this process. The extent to which policy-makers indeed pay attention to "evidence" and how research findings are chosen also needs to be scrutinized more thoroughly. Furthermore, forging the field's identity includes establishing ties with other fields of communication studies. Communication policy scholars perform research on policy issues and

thus are naturally inclined to believe that their work is policy-relevant. Yet any research within communication studies can potentially inform communication policy-making (Kunkel & Farinola, 2001). Given the proliferation of media-related challenges facing today's societies, researchers from different traditions and fields in communication studies can contribute valuable knowledge (McChesney, 2009; Pickard, 2013). Indeed, many scholars already contribute to policy research without identifying themselves as policy scholars or without necessarily realizing that they are performing policy-relevant work. Pursuing cooperation beyond the research field will accordingly add to its richness.

Looking back on the recent advances in communication policy research, Napoli and Friedland (2016) are hopeful that the next generation of scholars will be better trained in theories and methods and will have a more holistic view of the relationship between research and policy-making. We tend to agree – but anticipate that it will be hard work. Evidently then, even when advocating a move beyond self-castigation, communication policy researchers are not in danger of becoming uncritical of their own field.

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