

Media Policy

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Media policy addresses a wide range of contemporary concerns regarding the structure and the performance of media systems in the past, the present, and the future. In effect, the study of media policy and its process is a complex affair. On the one hand, it deals with multifaceted and large-scale policy problems, and on the other hand, it is related to problems that are influenced by a good number of forces and actors. Although it has often been argued that media policy has been largely technology driven, most of the decisions taken to deal with change are framed by political, economic, and institutional dimensions as well as by international factors. The importance of media policy lies in its linkage with politics, technology, and economics. The globalization of capital, markets, and competition, the convergence of the media, and the entry of new and global actors, both private and public, make the study of media and communications policy a relevant and exciting research field (Papathanassopoulos & Negrine, 2010).

To discover the factors that influence media policy one has to go beyond the conventional view of media theories and try to combine them with policy studies. In practice it is difficult to conceptualize policy, even as a term, because on the one hand, there is no single definition for analyzing and approaching policy, and on the other, policy usually involves a wide range of issues, actors, and aspects. “Policy” can refer to a set of explanations and intentions, to the realization of intentions, to a series of actions and their consequences, or to all of these together (Papathanassopoulos & Negrine, 2010, pp. 3–4). Thus, policy is made in a variety of different contexts, each producing different outcomes, and it seems preferable to consider policy analysis as a general description of the subject matter under scrutiny. In the media and communications domain, media policy usually refers to regulation “of different mass media (radio, television, the press) and telecommunication, which in the era of digital convergence embraces new digital and online media, computers and the Internet” (Iosifidis, 2011, p. 7).

Inaction may also be a kind of policy; an absence of a policy is therefore a positive decision in favor of nonintervention in media industries, as in the newspaper sector in Europe. Policies can also often have unintended consequences, and these may be critical for certain media. Policies are often incremental, building on past rules, and may be contradictory in as much as they will deal with some sectors but not with others. Thus, traditional media may differ from new media policy, so creating anomalies. The Internet, in many ways, offers challenges to policy processes that have traditionally dealt with separate media.

In policy studies it is suggested that past policies become an important part—sometimes the most important part—of the environment to which the future must adapt. Whether this is still the case in a context wherein the Internet has

forced “older” means of communication to implode (e.g., newspapers) or reconfigure themselves (e.g., broadcast services) is arguable. That said, much policy-making is often no more than *policy succession* whereby an existing policy or program is succeeded by another.

The *implementation* of a policy is often the most important and most difficult phase in the policy process and it could be argued that, due to the complex sociopolitical, cultural, and economic character of such policies, it is a particularly problematic area of study. It is at the point of implementation that deficiencies—or unintended consequences—of policies often materialize. It is also at this stage that one can pass judgment on the success, or failure, of a policy. Nevertheless, implementation is a phase that needs to be paid much attention and it is often overlooked in accounts that look at the generation of policy.

Policies are, nevertheless, the outcome of an interaction between a government’s approach to problem-solving and discussions, including bargaining, between a government and other actors engaged in the formulation of policy outcomes, inextricably glued with politics, whether in agendas or procedures (Chakravartty & Sarikakis, 2007, pp. 4–5). As Sophia Kaitatzi-Whitlock (2005, p. 17) argues, the way we organize the media field creates the way we organize politics and the political sphere itself. As she points out, “Media policy is itself a medium of control which acts upon politics and at the same time it is a product of the political process” (p. 17). In effect, there is a critical relation between media policy on the one hand, and political communication on the other. These distinct processes of exercising power feed into one another and, provided there is a balance of power, they mutually determine one another to the benefit of the public interest. Moreover, one also has to take into consideration the role of the media in the policy process, their potential influence (agenda-setting) as well as their interference not only in the decision-making process but also in the implementation and evaluation of public policies as well as their capacity to bring new issues and new frames into the policy debate (see Koch-Baumgarten & Voltmer, 2010).

Media policy research

Media policy “emerged as an identifiable field within the broader domain of Western media and communications studies in the 1950s” (Mansell & Raboy, 2011, p. 1) and until the 1980s the term was not widely used. Dramatic changes in communications systems and technologies have drawn nation-states and international organizations, such as the European Union and the International Telecommunications Union, into a consideration of the need for strategic approaches to managing technological (and implicitly communication) change for national, regional, and/or international benefit.

Broadly speaking, media policy research seeks to examine the ways in which policies in the field of communications are generated and implemented, and their repercussions for the field of communications as a whole. Van Cuilenburg and McQuail (2003) refer to three paradigmatic phases of communications and media policy shifts in the United States and Western Europe. The first is the paradigm of emerging communications

industry policy from the mid-19th century until World War II. In this phase media policy was mainly pursued for reasons of state interest and financial corporate benefits. The second phase of media policy, which was extended from the aftermath of World War II until the late 1980s, was dominated by sociopolitical rather than economic or national strategic concerns. In this phase, the public concern (such as the ideal of public service broadcasting) was at its height, rather than the technological considerations. Since the mid-1980s, technological, economic, and social trends fundamentally changed the context of media policy. In many countries, governments adopted policies of breaking the “bastions of the state” including the monopolies of the public service broadcasters and the privatization of the media sector. Thus, since the 1990s, we have entered a new (current) phase, a new media policy paradigm driven by the convergence and the digitalization of the communications systems (see below).

Media policy as a theoretical approach is characterized by its interdisciplinarity. Sociology and politics are given priority in most relevant studies because policy issues mature within a societal context, determining the nature of political actors, decision-making structures and processes, as well as policy outcomes; but economics and industrial/technological considerations do not lag far behind. In fact, the interdisciplinary character of media policy and its analysis permits anybody from any discipline to be involved. Economists, lawyers, sociologists, and political scientists have all contributed to, and interpreted, communication policy science and/or analysis and research. Even media studies with its macroperspective on media matters can provide “research [that] might be useful for policy makers” (Braman, 2010). Media policy is multidimensional by nature because the problems concerning public policy analysis are simply too complex to permit solution from a single disciplinary base.

The communications universe and the media field in particular are influenced by the emergence of new technologies. In effect, it has been widely recognized that media policy analysis has been rather inadequate for an environment that had changed as a result of technological innovation. As Denis McQuail has noted, media policy “is now a familiar category for a branch of public administration and law that has grown in significance and for a branch of inquiry in the social sciences that has also acquired a clear identity as a field of teaching, research and publication” (2007, p. 9). It is, though, something that is still “guided ultimately by political, social and economic goals” even though “they have been reinterpreted and reordered” (McQuail, 2005, p. 240).

The “public interest” as a condition in media policy

In media policy the issue of the public interest is a critical consideration. As Petros Iosifidis notes, “public interest idea provides a comprehensive mechanism via which policymakers and researchers can pass judgements upon the performance of media

systems” (2011, p. 5). Although the history of the public interest goes back to classical times, as a concept it remains ambiguous, and not only in the media field. When applied to the mass media, according to McQuail,

its simple meaning is that [policy-making bodies] carry out a number of important, even essential, informational and cultural tasks and it is in the general interest (or good of the majority) that these are carried out well and according to the principles of efficiency, justice, fairness, and respect for current social and cultural values. At the minimum, we can say that it is in the public interest that the media should do no harm, but the notion entails many positive expectations as well as restrictions and forms of accountability. (2003, p. 47)

A simple way to distinguish the meaning of the public interest is among the three main rival concepts: the utilitarianism, unitary, and common interest approaches.

In utilitarianism, the public interest in the media field will be best achieved by giving more freedom to media market forces, which eventually tend to the maximization of benefit for both producers and consumers and to the society as a whole.

In the unitary concept, the public interest is decided by reference to some single dominant value or ideology. This would only work in a paternalist system in which decisions about what is good are decided by guardians or experts. Its main application could be considered the foundation of “public service broadcasting.” This is because public service broadcasting is often defined in terms of benefits, including the delivery to society of universal provision and wide-ranging appeal; services to regions and minorities; attention to national interest, identity, and culture; the provision of informational and educational services beyond what the market would require; and so on.

Between these two approaches there is the common interest theory (McQuail, 2003). This refers to cases where a common interest is not an aggregation of individual interests, but is a shared interest, with little scope for dispute over preferences. In the media field, basic features of national media structures and the services they provide (e.g., technical standards, press subsidies, frequency allocations, access to political parties, rules for advertising) are often justified on grounds of a wider “common good,” transcending individual choices and preferences, with more reference to experts or to tradition than to the balance of popular opinion. The principle of freedom of speech and publication may itself have to be supported on grounds of long-term benefits to society which are not immediately apparent or clear to many individuals. In the political communication arena, the demand for an informed citizenship by the media is regarded as a necessity in a democratic political system and thus in every citizen’s interest.

In his study of the foundation of communications policy in the United States, Philip Napoli has presented a conceptual model in which the “public interest is shown to be achieved by way of five media policy principles: localism, the free marketplace of ideas, universal service, diversity and competition” (2001, pp. 22–28). He also notes that these principles represent the key guiding principles, but they lack a broad consensus in terms of stable, explicit, and coherent interpretations. This is because there are several interpretations of the public interest in media and communications policy. Nevertheless, the idea of the “public interest” remains problematic. In the age of globalization and deregulation, one witnesses the strengthening of concentration of media ownership through mergers and acquisitions in the industry (Meier, 2011). Moreover, in an era that

witnesses the rise of individualism, and neoliberalism's and neoconservatism's increasingly dominant managerialist ideology, there are wider beliefs that only by adopting commercial practices can governments and public institutions achieve efficiency and effectiveness and thus best serve the public interest.

Media policy and the state in the era of globalization

In seeking to comprehend the complexities of the media and policy process, scholars from both fields have worked with a number of different approaches to analyze the growing impact of communications and the new media technologies on sociopolitical and economic life, and the role of the state and state action in modern society in general, and in the media field in particular (see also Mansell & Raboy, 2011).

Analyzing communications policies in terms of the state directs our attention to a single, general problem, namely, the interrelation between governing institutions within a nation-state and other interests within that state vying to be heard when policy is under discussion. The centrality of the state is critical for understanding policy generation and implementation, since state intervention in the communications landscape is widespread and ranges from facilitating industrial development through subsidies and tax concessions to direct ownership of certain industries or companies. For example, the deregulation and liberalization of the British telecommunications sector stemmed not from the pressure of vested interests but from the willingness of the Thatcher government to offend against the "bastions of the state." The differences between the media systems in western societies can be traced to their political history and societal arrangements. In respect of these issues in the context of media governance, Donges (2007, p. 327) notes three points that need to be emphasized:

- Actors such as media organizations (institutionalized as private or public companies) or regulatory authorities, and so on, cannot be considered decoupled from the institutional setting they emerged from. Moreover, institutional rules define how organizations observe and evaluate their environment. Organizations bear their institutional history inside and cannot shake it off. They are path dependent in the sense that it is hard to change their structures.
- Institutional rules are the basis of media regulation, and all forms of regulation are always rooted in institutional arrangements. That is the reason why we can distinguish different models of media and politics or different "ideas" or regulatory cultures even within Europe.
- Institutional rules are always the products of decisions made by media, political, or economic actors.

On the other hand, in our interdependent and complex world, one could say that individual states and societies in the age of globalization have become increasingly interdependent economically, industrially, and culturally, and a global framework for media policy has emerged. Communications and media systems in the age of the Internet are part of a global communications system, necessitating policy guidelines to enable the

national system to work well within an international system. As Mansell and Raboy note:

With the spread of the internet in the late 1990s, there was an increase in the visibility of the disputes over policy and regulation, and the formal institutions of policy were faced with many disruptive issues, leading to considerable destabilization of the existing policy regimes, both nationally and internationally. (2011, p. 9)

In effect, policy and regulation in the media sector have moved away from being essentially part of a domestic political process and towards becoming part of a new complex international dimension of technological, industrial, and economic governance. As Mansel and Raboy point out, “Global media and communication policy emerged as a field over an extended period and it did so in parallel with processes of technological and geopolitical change” (p. 1).

Political systems and policy processes are influenced more and more from abroad, meaning that old orthodoxies about boundaries of the state as a country need re-examining. Converging computing, telecommunications, and television have brought not only new actors but also international actors into the communications field and intensified the trends towards the globalization of production, investment, and distribution. Satellite technology and the Internet breach aspects of national sovereignty. In fact, there are many bodies nowadays—such as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the World Trade Organization (WTO), UNESCO, WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization), ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers), the EU—which deal with various aspects of international systems and at the same time affect national regulations (McQuail, 2005). One has also to take into account the nongovernmental organizations which have in the last decades gained increasing importance as actors in international relations, world politics, and global governance.

Such a “complex interdependence” (Keohane & Nye, 1998) in the information age generates distinctive political processes and the communications technology revolution continues to lend support to this trend, bringing more and more activities within an international agreements framework. In effect, the international arena is increasingly characterized by competition and cooperation among states, reflecting internal and external conflicts over national versus global solutions to problems. It is unlikely that many contemporary technological or communications phenomena could be identified as solely internal or solely external. Nonetheless, this distinction helps us gain a perspective on the role of the state in the international context and its interaction with other sovereign states. In this formulation, the state acts not merely as a mediator between internal demands and external constraints and pressures, but as a shaper, capable of molding its own preference between domestic and international policy determinants. For example, although the governments in Europe have almost everywhere withdrawn from any directly *dirigiste* role, they “retain the right and sometimes the obligation to react or restrain market developments on behalf of a public (sometimes national) interest and also to establish and maintain conditions for efficient and fair operation of a free market” (McQuail, 2007, p. 11).

As well as being the primary unit of analysis, the state is generally also the foremost unit of action, although the environment—whether domestic, international, or both—may constrain state action. Globalization, for example, imposes structural imperatives on states, so limiting their action. This does not, however, contravene the idea of the “relative autonomy” of the state from both society and the global economy. In effect, international cooperation has spread considerably in the last decades, but its impact depends on the extent to which negotiated agreements are actually carried out. The lack of any established legal and political arrangements causes problems for implementing policies. The EU is a prime example because its specific business is to complement, supplement, and even replace individual policies of its member states without being a political union (Chakravartty & Sarikakis, 2007). Moreover, within Europe the integration process has been inextricably bound up with the transformation of both the traditional system of “nation-states” and the role of individual member states. This transformation has not been solely the product of integration but has derived from other developments such as globalization, new developments in economic management, notably the move towards the regulatory state, and domestic moves towards “new public management.” In other words, European integration, if not EU Europeanization, is seen as a dependent variable of state development at the *national* level, and this has produced new forms of governance and new institutions of government, shaping what Castells (2000) has called the “network state.” In fact, there are still wide margins for strategic behavior by politicians to pursue their “national interest” policies (Papathanassopoulos & Negrine, 2010).

To conclude, regardless of global pressures and influences, the wider communication system will continue to be dominated by the nation-state and it remains a useful mechanism for collective control over communications media. Even in the case of Internet, nations tend to regulate the Internet in their own way. As McQuail notes, “for the foreseeable future, mass communication will continue to be dominated by the nation-state and the small group of rich and powerful countries that arbitrate world events” (2005, p. 270). Indeed, in the current era of the financial, monetary, and traditional mainstream media crisis the role of the state becomes more critical as a provider of solutions to problems: As the failures of market mechanisms become apparent, guided state-inspired solutions may need to come to the fore.

Prospects for media policy research

We need to be continually aware of the complex forces that come into play when policies are being made. A range of forces feed into the ways policies are determined (for example, the contrasting illustrations of the different types of actors who can be involved in policy-making) and/or should be determined. In all these ways, media policy research seeks to explore how regulators, governments, and public policies shape the communications and information industries and social practices (Papathanassopoulos & Negrine, 2010). Within this sort of framework, most of the studies in the field of media and communications policy have focused on the changes,

if not the effects, that have been brought about by privatization, liberalization, and competition in communication industries.

However, we have to bear in mind that a good deal of the substantive knowledge required in problem-oriented policy analyses comes predominantly from political science and media studies, while other disciplines work on an auxiliary basis. When one considers the increasingly international character of technological and communication changes, it is plain to see that the researcher's task gains added complexity. But it is a task that needs to be undertaken, and the challenge of explaining processes of policy generation and implementation remains one that should be considered. By and large, the fact that policy emerges out of a continuing conversation between what is and what should be, and who has a right to participate in that conversation, makes the field of study of especial interest.

In the age of media convergence, digitalization, and globalization, media policy—termed either communication(s) or information society policy—will remain an area of great importance. As governments, vested interests, citizens, and consumers all grapple with how to deal with major developments, be it the “digital divide,” the digital switchover, or the “digital nation,” we can begin to see the significance of sound policy-making for economic and industrial as well as political reasons. In the age of media convergence, digitalization, and globalization, the study of media policy is a complex area of study and any attempt to force policy into any narrow theoretical frame should be looked at with some degree of skepticism. Media and communications policy nowadays demands a critical, multidisciplinary, and comparative approach.

SEE ALSO: Agenda-Setting; Globalization; Media Effects Theory; Media Regulation, Political; Media System; Political Communication; Public Affairs; Public Service Broadcasting

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