Against the American Policy Paradigm

Position Paper for the Media Policy, Media Reform, and Media Criticism Panel

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The most productive way to discuss media policy in today's context of technological change is to penetrate through the constraints of what I refer to as the "American policy paradigm." This discursive framework, within which many D.C.-based media policy discussions unfold, favors technical and economic considerations at the expense of normative ones. This orientation tends to systematically neglect the politics of policymaking, thus ensuring that structural understandings and prescriptions for reform are kept off the table. This policy paradigm was evident when interests aligned against mandated net neutrality attempted to portray the debate as primarily technical instead of dealing with core democratic concerns. FCC Commissioner Robert McDowell epitomized this position recently in a *Washington Post* op-ed. Referring to crucial Internet policies, he asserted that, "engineers, not politicians or bureaucrats, should solve engineering problems." Reducing media policy to solely technical concerns and questions of efficiency is a decades-old recurring pattern in debates ranging from spectrum policy fights to struggles over the ownership and control of media outlets.

To depoliticize media policy issues helps to demobilize media reform efforts. Therefore, it is incumbent upon scholars to help bring crucial context to light in discussing media policy. By insisting that we include questions of politics, history, and normative understandings to policy discussions, scholars help connect media policy to larger questions—questions that typically fall within the purview of scholarly debates. For example, in addition to accounting for technological

changes in media systems, we can address political economic questions pertaining to ownership and control of media infrastructure. We can ask historical questions about the antecedents that have led us to current predicaments. And we can pose normative questions and policy prescriptions that would benefit the most people and contribute to a vibrant democratic communication system.

Media scholars and educators can participate in the policymaking process in at least three ways. First, they can draw from their scholarship to contribute to policy proceedings and provide reports and memos to policymakers. For example, public comment periods at the FCC provide an excellent opportunity for scholars to contribute written statements or even entire journal-length articles that can have a direct effect on policy decisions. Furthermore, staffers in congressional and regulatory offices are often very receptive to bullet point memos explaining policy positions. Second, media scholars can publish op-eds, blog posts, and popular journal articles to help clarify public understandings regarding what is at stake with specific media policies.

Finally, media scholars and educators can help engage their students in participating in the policymaking process. I have found when discussing these issues in the classroom that students are very receptive when I can show how policy decisions directly impact their daily lives. For example, policies around intellectual property, net neutrality, media ownership and rate structures have an effect on their daily Internet use. After demonstrating that connection, I set up classroom activities where the students divide into groups to create their own bills and explain to the class how they will shepherd their bill into law. Many of my students have told me that this classroom activity is one of their favorite.

The overarching theme for all of these approaches is that media scholars should help clarify policy issues for public consumption while encouraging people to directly engage with the policymaking process. Often times, policy issues are not overly complicated, but have been strategically obfuscated by specific interest groups. In addition to net neutrality, the national debate on media ownership is another useful case study of how large sectors of the public were engaged, dramatically impacting a crucial policy debate. Much historical evidence suggests that if media policy issues are debated openly and democratically, the case for media reform becomes paramount.

To summarize, media scholars and educators can best advocate for reform via their own scholarship and writings and by helping to engage their students and the broader public (as well as fellow scholars). Through public scholarship, academics can help clarify what is at stake and provide analyses toward addressing media-related problems. To advocate for reform does not mean we must compromise our work; simply providing empirically-grounded research composed in an accessible format renders our work relevant for constituencies outside of the academy and helps make the case for media reform. By connecting how media policy issues and debates directly impact people's everyday lives, we are doing our job of providing good public scholarship.

Given the current media landscape of technological and political change, new opportunities and problems arise. Media polices that will affect our democracy for at least decades will be determined during the critical juncture of the coming years. Media scholars have much to contribute to these debates. It is our responsibility to provide analytical tools to the public that helps enable direct engagement with media policy.