Policy Matters: Exploring Opportunities for Media Policy Scholars in Public Debates

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I see two needed developments in the relationships between media studies, media policy, and citizens. The first involves making boring stuff 'sexy;' the second involves making the sexy stuff a little more 'boring.' Both of these can take advantage of net neutrality's rising profile as an opportunity to bring attention to and explanation of the too-often ignored and too-little understood workings of media regulation and infrastructure.

Regulation and infrastructure both have a notorious reputation as dull and tedious. Indeed, both regulation and infrastructure have been subjects of prominent calls to "study boring things" (Lentz 2009, Star 1999). Following these, we can see how it is not a coincidence that both regulation and infrastructure are generally impenetrable to all but insiders and that there is great power that comes with such invisible control through these systems. They are the domains of the lawyers, economists, and technologists who properly speak the languages that operate there, we are told, not for academics from outside the technocratic legalese priesthood and certainly not for the everyday citizens whose interests are meant to be served there. 'Boring' is strategically deployed within the operations of regulation and infrastructure in ways that obscure the consequential— and actually quite sexy— battles for control that go on there. With this in mind, media scholars should be bringing attention and analysis to regulation and infrastructure from more culturally conscious perspectives— making the boring stuff sexy— and also making this a part of scholarly conversations on media culture that tend to ignore such dry stuff— making the sexy stuff a little more boring.

We first ought to further critical cultural approaches to media regulation and infrastructure. Positivist empirical perspectives from law and engineering still dominate media policy and technology literature, but there is now a productive movement of critical cultural interpretive analyses of media policy and infrastructure (Streeter 2013, Sandvig 2013). In line with these critical approaches within policy studies, we need to better account for the intriguing and significant cultural politics that hide in the arcane bureaucratic minutia of administrative legal rulings and the technicalities of digital bits flowing along underground wires.

The flip side of this coin, however, is to more fully ground critical cultural media studies in the workings of regulation and infrastructure. Broadly speaking, media and cultural studies is unfortunately not immune to the assumption that regulation and infrastructure are intrinsically dull and— especially as an intellectual tradition more closely associated with the crucially important but more self-evidently 'fun stuff' of popular culture textual and audience analyses— getting traction for moving the 'boring stuff' toward the center of the field is rather difficult. Studies of regulation and infrastructure exist largely on the margins of the scholarly conversation within media studies. When policy or infrastructure do make their way to core media studies dialogues it is most often in a 'you have to eat your vegetables' sort of moment, as the obligatory broccoli that sits to the side of the meat and potatoes of the inquiry itself. This has begun to change recently, as part of the 'industrial turn' and 'material turn' in media

and cultural studies (e.g., Holt 2014). While encouraging, there is much to be done to bring policy and infrastructure to the head table in the field— especially as objects of study in their own right, not just limited to their relevance to concerns within media industries, such as with the resurgence of interest in media distribution.

Net neutrality represents an exciting opportunity to engage more media scholars and citizens in the workings of regulation and infrastructure— it is that rare 'boring' issue that has successfully gained some notoriety as actually somewhat sexy. Net neutrality has proven a catalyst for public engagement— look, for instance, at the popularity of John Oliver's tour-de-force commentary and the million comments submitted to the latest FCC proceeding. In a most unlikely way, people are becoming aware of and involved with exceedingly wonky concepts like Title II reclassification and broadband 'specialized services.' We should use the opportunity of net neutrality's vibrancy to further such understandings of and participation in the typically impenetrable workings of media policy and infrastructure.

While the FCC's weak 2010 Open Internet rules were gutted earlier this year and the new rules being debated currently are even weaker, such failure in net neutrality policy actually underscores how it still resonates in principle. Net neutrality discourse taps into deep-rooted public values of equality and fairness and it shows potential as a means through which to revitalize the tradition of affirmative government intervention for democratic communications, further relevant across issues from data surveillance to algorithmic filtering. There is a crucial role for media studies scholars to play in advancing this cause of more equitable media infrastructures through regulation— we might start by getting this whole boring/sexy thing figured out first.

Works Cited

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