

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

When Policy Goes Pop: Implications of the Popularization of Policy Activism

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I conceived of this panel when I saw a T-shirt that paired the *Twilight*-inspired phrase “Team Edward” with an image of Edward Snowden. Aside from desperately wanting to wear that shirt around town to gauge reactions to it, I found it perfectly encapsulated the popularization of media policy, a trend visible through widely shared clips like John Oliver’s [call](#) on *Last Week Tonight* for all the trolls across the country to wield their puckish venom against the FCC’s proposed Open Internet Rules and through the public’s intensifying awareness of the ways media policy may impact daily life. While it is easy to celebrate this attention to policy matters, as examples of an engaged populace and the realization of a healthy democracy, a few qualifications are necessary when considering the implications of pop policy.

There is an appetite among the public for policy reporting and analysis, and media scholars have a role to play to address gaps in the current journalistic manifestations of pop policy. Let’s start by problematizing the romantic narrative that the [people rose](#) in 2012 to [defeat](#) the SOPA/PIPA legislation that threatened to undermine the Open Internet. To what extent were the bills defeated by the reported ten million [signatures](#) attached to online petitions and the three million emails sent to Congressional representatives, compared to the influence of the opposition of [Silicon Valley giants](#), including Google, Yahoo, Facebook, and Twitter, among others?

Similarly, how is the public participating in public policy discourse and what are the limitations of these forms of engagement? [The Verge reports](#), for example, that public comments about the FCC’s proposed Open Internet Rules contained over 1,400 uses of forms of the word “fuck,” a finding that amuses me but also reinforces narratives of an [ignorant voting public](#). Increasing use of web-facilitated [form letters](#) organized by advocacy groups may increase participation in official government deliberations, but do they also, necessarily, limit the impact of communication that can be discarded into a [repeat pile](#) of opinions that lack credibility and [evidence](#)?

When scholars translate our original research for a wider audience, however, we can intervene and address the limitations of current efforts to engage the public. I corresponded with University of Pennsylvania policy scholar [Peter Decherney](#), who has begun writing a series of blog posts for *Forbes* online, averaging one post a month and earning anywhere from three thousand to nineteen thousand page views for each piece. Decherney does not depend upon his *Forbes* writing for his salary, and he has already achieved the position of full professor, so he

enjoys particular financial and professional freedom as a public policy critic. Taking advantage of this privilege, Decherney has found great value in the experience of writing for *Forbes*, noting that he considers engagement with the public a “core mission of academia.”

The idea that addressing the public is a core mission of academia seems, to me, to have gotten lost in the intensification of the publish or perish lifestyle. While the web has certainly enhanced our means to address a wider audience, institutional priorities have rendered this type of work supplemental rather than integral expressions of our cultural role. Distinct from the methods of journalists, scholars wield a nuanced set of tools to explain the ways media shapes culture, particularly from a historical and ideological perspective. While popular writing should not replace original scholarly research, a better balance in the demands of the P&T process may encourage scholars to prioritize not only the immediate university classroom but also the broader potential of popular writing as a public classroom.

There is a profound question lurking beneath all talk about public intellectualism and public activism: how may any critic of the status quo inspire genuine change? The FCC has always ceded to expertise, defined generally as those who boast the most familiarity with industry operations: insiders. For that reason, we’ve witnessed a revolving door between industry and government that scholars have long critiqued, though prompting [little improvement](#) it seems. Perhaps the role of the scholar should be more provocative, exploiting the purpose of tenure, by demanding particular policy changes directly, and through public forums like *Forbes*. Our academic freedom allows the scholar to envision radical prospects, to render visible the corruption within the very structure of the FCC’s nomination and rulemaking processes, the commission’s deference to industry comments and research reports, and the ways citizenship wields less power than consumer activism. With a stronger investment within our academic departments upon a wider circulation of ideas, media scholars may be best positioned to serve as activists to persuade the public about the utter failure of market logics to deliver on promises of universal service and access to affordable communications technologies.