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

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As a Canadian studying media in the United States I have frequently been asked if I'm going to go back to Canada and "teach" media producers how to make successful products. They seem to assume the problem is that Canadians are inherently bad at making television and movies. At the heart of many Canadian programs and policies for media is the understanding of the ways in which the market is not free. While reflective of the market in general, this fundamental issue can be very hard to connect with as it is so opposed to the idealized market that is frequently assumed to exist. And so we frequently blame the texts that do get produced for having low production values or not being exciting enough. This lack of understanding of the role the market plays in the industry is a fundamental stumbling block that limits the ability of interventionist policies to attract public support. However, recent developments in both Canada and the United States have made policy a more accessible arena for the public

Policy can seem to many to be far removed from both daily life and the public. This can make it difficult to both get involved in the process and for others to convince the public of the importance of participation. While attracting public support may not always be easy, it is clear that numerous individuals have strong opinions about policy. The FCC's site crashing after John Oliver's segment on net neutrality is only one of the most recent examples of the public's willingness to get involved in policy matters. According to NPR, the FCC has received 45,000 comments and 300,000 emails on the topic of net neutrality. The previous record for comments on a FCC measure was just under 2,000. Without getting too "up with the people", instances like these make clear that people are concerned, but frequently may have no idea how to express that concern. When, as in Oliver's segment, they are provided a clear and accessible outlet, it appears as though many are willing to communicate their thoughts on issues of policy and governance. This accessibility is also due in part to the multiplicity of technologies available to individuals.

Convergence has brought technological issues to the fore for many consumers. Digital technologies have inadvertently shone light onto media policies for many people as numerous types of media (each with its own rules and regulations) are all accessible through a singular device. Many individuals may feel a disconnect between the policies in place and the ways in which they consume (and wanted to consume) media. This can make many of the current divisions seem out of touch. With so much content accessible through legally grey areas, it is pressing that policy be created or modified so as to address these methods. Getting the "this content is unavailable in your area" notice from an online source makes explicit the physical boundary lines that still exist. The disconnect between policy and current practice has brought certain issues directly to consumers as they attempt to use their devices for a variety of uses. These disparate trends have converged to create a moment for issues of policy.

Media policy has frequently been considered the purview of stuffy bureaucrats who are far removed from the media they are attempting to regulate. Recent developments have served to alter this perception. Instead of kind but out of touch office workers, the current depictions of policy workers are presented as more reminiscent of that of a political thriller. The coverage of Edward Snowden added "international intrigue" to this thriller. Much of the initial coverage of Snowden was related to where he was in the world and what countries might be willing to take him in. The coverage suggested that the stakes had been raised in the policy world and that employees might be far cooler and connected than initially suspected. This shift in trends of coverage has worked to make policy "sexier" if you will. This

understanding can in many ways be considered a re-branding of policy work. Through this shift in opinion, many individuals have become more interested in the field.