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Communication in Action: Bridging Research and Policy - Introduction

Jason A. Smith

Mark Lloyd

Victor Pickard

University of Pennsylvania, vpickard@asc.upenn.edu

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Keywords

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Communication in Action: Bridging Research and Policy

Introduction

JASON A. SMITH
George Mason University, USA

MARK LLOYD
University of Southern California, USA

VICTOR PICKARD
University of Pennsylvania, USA

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Across the social sciences and humanities, a trend is emerging toward greater academic engagement with broader publics (see Burawoy, 2005; Calhoun, 2007; Mullins, 2011). Although debates within various disciplines over specific types of engagement have important differences, a core argument asserts that research must move beyond the academy. Recent attempts within the field of communication have sought to link research and policy, specifically ascertaining whether communications research can have a direct impact on the decisions of policy makers, or, at the very least, public policy debates (Napoli & Aslama, 2011; Pickard, 2015; Price & Verhulst, 2008). The articles for this Special Section reach beyond the academy, utilizing perspectives and tools from the social sciences and humanities—and communication in particular—to address important and ongoing policy issues relevant to diverse constituencies. Documenting various practices by government agencies, private entities, and nonprofit organizations, the essays arranged for this Special Section are all drawn from a cohort of doctoral students and emerging scholars who spent the summer of 2014 working alongside policy practitioners while examining the policy-making process as fellows with the Consortium on Media Policy Studies (COMPASS).

Applied communication and policy work has a rich history within the field, yet its efforts have yielded mixed results. As others have noted (Ang, 2008; Lentz, 2014; Yanich, 2008), scholarship and policy often run on incongruent paths given their different structural parameters and the practices and norms of these distinct endeavors. However, the push for crossing such parameters ranges across various activities and policy issues. In regard to media policy, Freedman (2014) suggests scholarly attention to policy can sometimes undermine the agency of individuals and groups working within media policy settings. This critique highlights the ways that policy is often seen as separate from the more direct attention media studies give toward producers and consumers of media products. The seeming drudge of regulation, law, and policy gets swept aside in academia for the glitz of production processes and audience reception studies. Rather than engaging in the hard work of exposing complex dimensions of power that

shape the media environment in relation to institutions that also involve the state, the market, and civil society, media studies scholars too often focus on the shiny new technology trend. Given the importance of information and communications issues to a wide range of social issues, media scholarship can provide insights that help various groups and individuals (Barge, 2001; see also Gattone, 2006, pp. 129–146).

The COMPASS Program

In 2004, a group of department chairs and deans from communication studies programs around the country formed the Consortium on Media Policy Studies. The purpose of the consortium is to build bridges between the academic study of legacy and emerging media and the needs of policy makers. COMPASS seeks to train doctoral candidates in the practice of communication policy making. In addition, we seek to encourage policy makers—both government and NGOs—to productively engage with and embrace the valuable contributions media studies scholars can make to their work.

Over the course of 8–10 weeks during a summer, COMPASS Fellows bring media scholarship skills to policy makers. COMPASS Fellows have worked with government institutions such as the Federal Communications Commission, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the World Bank, as well as Common Cause, Free Press, Public Knowledge, and other NGOs. COMPASS Fellows have conducted rigorous empirical analyses, surveyed prior scholarship, and contributed substantive research so that policy makers might reach informed decisions based on academic work. COMPASS is generating a new cohort of scholars, activists, and policy makers who can engage with communication challenges at the global, state, and local levels. These efforts bridge the research interests of future scholars with forward-looking policy agendas.

Contributions in this Special Section

The commentaries presented within this section of the *International Journal of Communication* highlight unique opportunities from the 2014 cohort of COMPASS fellows to engage with ongoing issues regarding policy and communication research. Each of the authors spent a good portion of their summer working within policy-oriented organizations on topics relevant to their own research goals. Often working in organizations dominated by perspectives rooted in the legal field, the fellows were given the opportunity to bring their disciplinary insights into conversation with working professionals. In particular, these commentaries demonstrate the value and effectiveness that communication theories and perspectives bring to the table in speaking to such issues.

It is the aim of this Special Section that the commentaries provide a wide range of policy recommendations that are anchored in the field of communication and accessible to both academic and popular audiences. Demonstrating the insights that communication scholars can bring to policy analysis, Hentrich provides a case study in which qualitative methods, rooted in critical race and gender perspectives, helped her host organization make informed assessments regarding media coverage of LGBT athletes. Allen offers an insightful inquiry into the state of American journalism, and argues for reconceptualizing journalism based on the content of specific newsgathering practices. As the agency charged with governing the U.S. media environment, the Federal Communications Commission is the

subject of Forelle's critique, especially the way that it has dealt with issues of diversity. Commentaries by Maréchal, Losey, Metha, and Golob deal with issues related to the Internet and its intersection with human rights, governance, and privacy. And the pieces by Elder, Sangalang, and Duffy feature insights from health communication studies. The diverse and provocative analyses collected here suggest that study of media policy is a growing and vibrant area of research.

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