

Communication Policy Research: Theoretically Practical but Practically Irrelevant?

41st EPRA Meeting

Ad-hoc Working Group 3 “Research & Regulators”

Bern, May 14-15, 2015

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For Starters: What is ECREA again?

■ **European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA)**



- society for communication scholars across Europe
 - consists of several thematic sections from audience studies to political communication
 - biennial European Communication Conference
- ## ■ **Communication Law and Policy Section (ECREA-CLP)**
- forum for the debate and analysis of communication policy
 - biggest network of communication/media policy scholars in Europe
 - workshops in the years in between ECREA conferences
 - <https://commlawpolicy.wordpress.com/>

The Shape of Things to Come

- 1. Communication Policy Research and Its (Lack of) Influence**
- 2. Current and Future Research**
- 3. The Pitfalls of Getting Involved in Communication Policy-Making**
- 4. Conclusion**

1. Communication Policy Research and Its (Lack of) Influence

Theoretically Practical but Practically Irrelevant?



- **nevertheless**

- communication policy issues are **low profile** (Havick 1983)
- communication policy and communication policy research **regarded with suspicion** (McQuail 1994)

What is Communication Policy Research?

- multidisciplinary field with lack of precise definitions
«... a widely disparate body of work about whose dimensions there is relatively little agreement» (Rowland 1984: 423)
- communication policy research encompasses **two tasks** (Lasswell 1970)
 - research **about** communication policy (subject)
 - research that **informs** communication policy-making (role of research in policy-making)
- informing communication policy-making leads to debates about the **role of communication policy research**
 - do scholars **want** to contribute to policy-making?
 - and, provided that they do, are they **successful**?

From Self-Consciousness to Self-Confidence

- scholars for long complain about a **lack of influence**
 - «without a real-world role» (Noam 1993: 199f.)
 - «The closer we get to ideas which have directly shaped public policy, the more communication scholarship recedes from the picture» (Mueller 1995: 459)
- opportunities to contribute to policy-making have improved
 - **directly**: demand for research in communication policy-making is greater than ever (Napoli & Gillis 2006)
 - **indirectly**: circulating relevant work to stakeholders; impact on selection and framing of policy issues
- to be heard necessary to
 - choose topical **subjects**
 - advance **theoretical** and **methodological** foundations

2. Current and Future Research

Choosing Topical Subjects

- researchers in the field communication policy (Reinard/Ortiz 2005; Galperin 2004; Streeter 1990)
 - focus on regulatory **details**
 - at the expense of the **broad structure of regulation** and of the policy-making **process**
- avenues for future research
 - keeping pace with **convergence**
 - **multi-level** governance
 - analyzing **processes and actors**

Theoretical Foundations

- most of communication policy research is **problem-driven** (Reinard/Ortiz 2005; Rowland 1984; Mosco/Rideout 1997)
 - high degree of technical expertise
 - but more descriptive than theoretically grounded, thus limited to ad-hoc explanations
- more theoretically grounded work that connects communication with the **larger body of social and political theory** is needed (McQuail 1994)
 - interests, institutions, ideas
 - innovation, coevolution, complexity approaches
 - governance

Methodological Skills

- **no self-consciousness** with respect to methods
 - there is plenty of empirical work, including comparisons
 - yet neither disclosed nor critically discussed
- more thorough discussion imperative
 - deal with methods of **comparison**
 - scrutinize our most used methods (**interviews, document analysis**)

Current Research in Europe and Beyond (I)

■ Structures and Processes

- liberalization & neoliberal media regulation
- policy-making process & influence/power
- governance and convergence

■ Diversity and Quality

- Public Service Broadcasting/Media
- media ownership concentration & gatekeepers/bottlenecks
- funding of journalism
- accountability of media
- net neutrality
- influence of algorithms

Current Research in Europe and Beyond (II)

- EU Regulation
- Basic Rights
 - freedom of expression
 - freedom of information
 - privacy & surveillance
- Users & Citizens
 - involvement of citizens in regulation and PSM
 - user empowerment

3. The Pitfalls of Getting Involved in Communication Policy-Making

The Pitfalls of Informing Policy-Making

- **hubris** of scholars
- inclination to meet the perceived needs of policy-makers: **limiting oneself** to more pragmatic subjects and approaches
- (ab)use of research to **legitimize decisions already taken**
- **evidence-based policy-making** not only has merits but also pitfalls

The Pitfalls of Evidence

- “obsession with evidence” (Freedman 2008)
 - not all aspects of media/communication easily quantified
 - scientific “evidence” not necessarily more impartial:
impossible to insulate policy-making from politics
- bias for certain evidence
 - bias for **quantitative data** as a disadvantage for less well-resourced groups
 - bias for **practical contributions** not perspectives that challenge existing power structures

4. Conclusion

Still: Cooperation is Fruitful

- scholars should not avoid dialogue with political actors
- making use of research highly important (e.g. Braman 2003; Melody 1990; Noam 1993; Pool 1974)
 - **more informed decision-making**
 - discussion of **new and inconvenient issues** and choices
- **rich yet demanding research field**
 - knowledge about communication policy greatly increased
 - need for more theoretical groundwork, methodological rigor and expansion of range of subjects to preserve position of relevance

Disclaimer

This presentation is partly based on an article co-written with Natascha Just, University of Zurich.

Just, N. & Puppis, M. (2012). Communication Policy Research: Looking Back, Moving Forward. In: N. Just & M. Puppis (Eds.), Trends in Communication Policy Research. New Theories, Methods & Subjects. Bristol/Chicago: intellect.

