

INTRODUCTION

Revitalizing Communication and Information Policy Research

This special issue of TIS is intended to promote communication and information policy (CIP) research as a renewed object of scholarly investigation. It is also intended to encourage political engagement around CIP issues by scholars using a diverse set of analytical tools.

Typically, policy research focuses on how regulators, governments, and public policies shape communication–information industries and social practices. This special issue tried to reverse that equation and investigate what our call for papers termed “the social determinants of public policy”—that is, how social practices, long-term socioeconomic changes, cultural norms, and the interest groups engaged in communication and information influence the development of laws, regulations, and policies.

Although CIP is typically a small specialty within communication, information, and law schools, and an even tinier subspecialty in schools of business, public policy, political science, and economics, the relevance and importance of the field can hardly be doubted. As one of the articles documents, communications and information has become one of the largest focal points of policy activity in the United States, routinely exceeding 50 Congressional hearings per year and rising to over 100 per year for 5 straight years from 1997 to 2001. Sandra Braman (2004, p. 153) further documented this phenomenon, noting that the current policy landscape “has become filled with laws and regulations dealing with information and communication. . . . Over 600 bills dealing with the Internet alone were on the table during the 107th Congress.”

Thus, in the following ways this special issue attempted to foster a renewal of what we are calling “engaged CIP scholarship:”

- By providing a forum in which scholars interested in the topic could demonstrate how breaking out of existing disciplinary silos might invigorate this field of research.
- By making a conscious decision to move beyond the policy discourse of the past 25 years, and reorient policy discourse around more recent ideas and global developments.
- By encouraging scholars across disciplines to explore the underlying social determinants of public policy in communication and information, thereby

deepening policy-oriented research and elevating its status both academically and politically.

The coeditors believe that they succeeded, just barely, in accomplishing two of those ambitious goals. The task proved to be more difficult than expected. Why that is so will become evident as we proceed through this introduction. Overall, one should consider this special issue a only a first step, and recognize the need for continuing such efforts through conference panels, special symposia, and publications.

TRANSCENDING DISCIPLINARY GHETTOS

The Call for Papers (CFP) requested contributions that “bring together insights from multiple areas, such as political science, sociology, economics, critical geography, information studies, urban studies, policy studies, communications, and cultural studies.” We did not succeed in this goal. The special issue failed to attract a significant number of submissions from disciplines such as political science, economics, and sociology, although it did encourage CIP scholars to engage with political science and institutional theories. Our failure to get other fields to take up the challenge of the CFP stems in part from their unfamiliarity with the specifics of communication and information industries and policies. For example, a social movement scholar who was interested in contributing to this issue felt that he lacked sufficient expertise in the area of communications industry, law, and policy to feel comfortable making a worthy submission. Equally important, interdisciplinary research in this area is still hampered by reward structures and disciplinary boundaries. Scholars want to publish in their “own” journals and make a name for themselves among members of their “own” scholarly communities. Thus, as CIP scholars, we are still engaged primarily in a dialogue internal to communication and information studies. We hope that dissemination of the special issue will spark more interest from and interactions with a variety of fields and disciplines.

Nevertheless, we did make some headway. The article by Hernan Galperin links communications and information studies to institutional economics. The Mueller, Page, and Kuerbis article on social movements and advocacy in CIP connects communication and information studies

with literature on interest groups and social movements from political science and sociological theories about organizational forms and organizational ecology. Audrey Selian's account of the World Summit on the Information Society introduces communication and information studies scholars to political science theories of civil society. Ian Hosein's analysis of international policy making dynamics draws on some of the law and economics regulation literature. While Wilkinson draws on some economic analyses of the media and trade in media products, his article mostly stays within the framework of communication studies.

FOSTERING A POSTLIBERALIZATION DISCOURSE

Our Call for Papers was predicated on our perception of a historical discontinuity in the policy world, creating the need for a major shift in the dominant preoccupations of communication and information policy discourse. We wanted to challenge the established community of CIP research by offering examples of a new discourse that is informed by theories from other disciplines. Although we are still in the early stages of its evolution, the basic contours of this shift are evident from these articles.

The old discourse, dominant from the mid-1970s to the end of the 1990s, was primarily about government versus market, regulation versus deregulation, competition versus monopoly in *national* institutions. The policy agenda was driven by the gathering momentum of privatization, liberalization and competition in communication industries that had been dominated for decades by national monopolies. Most academic research focused on the specific techniques and mechanisms by which liberalization could be brought about (or avoided), on its effects, and on normative debate about whether it was good or bad. Technological change was commonly seen as the key driver of these policy adjustments and, for better or worse, economics and the economic analysis of law became the dominant modes of analysis among real-world policymakers. While we acknowledge a more critical strand of CIP research informed by neomaxist political economy, we do not feel that this work has asserted much influence in the policy arena in Washington, DC.

Thus we wanted to use this issue to try to foster a postliberalization policy discourse, one that is forward looking and willing to set aside old ideological divisions to construct fresh conceptions of "the public interest" appropriate to a transformed economic and political environment. We succeeded only partially.

From the articles collected here, the contours of a new discourse are indeed apparent. Policy debate and CIP research are increasingly preoccupied with issues of globalization, trade and intercultural communication. Equally

important, instead of a simple disjunction between "government" and "market," there is a widespread recognition of the interface between the two: *institutions*. Institutions are the rules and norms that structure how both markets and governments work, and how collective benefits are distributed among actors. The Galperin article does an excellent job of bringing aspects of this approach within view. An emerging area of sustained policy contention is the complex interaction of cultural and commercial forces in the media, especially (again) at the transnational level. The Wilkinson article on language difference is representative of this area, but we would have liked to receive more submissions in this area.

The message that transnational institutions and policy issues are becoming more important in setting the CIP agenda globally comes across loud and clear in most of the papers. Selian analyzes political interactions among national governments, intergovernmental organizations, private business, and civil society in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Selian's analysis of WSIS complements the Mueller, Page, and Kuerbis article on advocacy groups in the United States, which focuses on the U.S. domestic arena. According to that article, CIP advocacy is starting to overcome the traditional segmentation of different media of communication into different policy domains, for example, by linking issues such as intellectual property, privacy, and infrastructure regulation into a single discourse. Public interest advocacy focused on media content is declining in significance relative to advocacy modes focused on rights and economics. Hosein, in contrast, emphasizes the role of states in manipulating policy agendas and outcomes via strategic behavior within international organizations and policy arenas, an activity driven in large part by their demand for enhanced surveillance capabilities. States make use of techniques such as policy laundering, policy modeling, and forum shopping, which undercut or supplant entirely national deliberative discourses on policy. These trends have been reinforced by the post-September 11 focus on control of terrorism, but have implications for CIP that go well beyond fighting terrorism. Galperin illustrates the critical role of institutions in determining CIP with a discussion of the digital TV transition in the United States. Wilkinson investigates the relationship between language and market access in cultural trade, and asks "how free trade enlargement engages particular sets of identity attributes among existing members of a trade regime on the one hand, and the new entrants on the other."

While there is widespread dissatisfaction with simplistic norms of efficiency as the be-all and end-all of policy, no alternative standard capable of guiding policy has been articulated in this special issue. This was one of the biggest weaknesses in the response to our call for papers. We detect a need for creative thinking on this topic. In

our view, the CIP field needs to shift foci from declining national-level public service monopolies in telecommunications and mass media toward analyses that can encompass the rise of cheap and abundant information products and services, transnational communication, networks of networks, converged media, and a surveillance state.

ENGAGING DEEPER FORMS OF ANALYSIS

Another key goal of the special issue was to change the level of analysis characteristic of policy research. Instead of confining attention to the mechanisms and effects of specific policies, laws, or regulations in narrow domains and short time frames, we wanted to direct scholarly attention to the underlying social and political determinants of CIP. That is, we wanted to challenge the field to ask more about what initiates and sustains change in this field and to encourage scholars to take prospective versus strictly retrospective approaches to thinking about CIP and its drivers.

The term “policy studies” in communication and information (and perhaps in other fields as well) seems to invoke short-term approaches to analysis. We received several submissions of international comparative research on the “effects” of various policies in different countries, looking at very narrow slices of time, as well as shorter term studies of specific countries. Such work definitely has value for policymakers, but in this special issue we were trying to highlight papers with a longer term perspective and a focus on the broader sociopolitical and economic trends within which CIP is embedded.

The articles we selected highlight the following determinants of communication–information policy:

- Culture and its complex intersection with commercial forces and trade norms (Wilkinson).
- Social movements and organized advocacy (Mueller et al., Selian).
- Institutional structures (Galperin, Selian, Mueller et al., Hosein).
- International policy dynamics and national security agendas (Hosein).

Drawing on social movement theory and sociological theories of organizational change, Mueller, Page, and Kuerbis analyze long-term change in CIP advocacy and interest group populations, as well as long-term change in the number of CIP issues in Congressional hearings. The CFP asked for analysis of the role of ideas in how change takes place in this field. The response we received was somewhat weak. Only the Galperin article deals with that seriously, contrasting idea-based or ideological explanations of policy change with two other schools of thought, one emphasizing technology and the other emphasizing institutions. Hosein’s work complements Galperin’s institutional perspective by documenting how governments act as self-interested maximizers of their own institutional power via strategic behavior in the international arena.

On the whole, we believe that this special issue takes some worthy first steps toward developing a broader approach to understanding CIP and how it is formed, but a vast amount of additional work in this area needs to be done. We share these articles as an invitation to join the editors and authors in cultivating a community of cross-disciplinary and politically engaged scholarship in CIP. We look forward to readers’ reflections and reactions.

*Milton Mueller
Becky Lentz
Guest Editors*

NOTE

Milton Mueller is Professor at Syracuse University School of Information Studies and co-director of The Convergence Center. Becky Lentz is a program officer for electronic media policy in the Media, Arts, and Culture unit at the Ford Foundation in New York City.

REFERENCE

Barman, S. 2004. Where has media policy gone? Defining the field in the 21st century. *Communication Law and Policy* 9(2):153–182.