Editorial

Democratizing Communication Policy in the Americas: Why It Matters

Communication policy is an important but often overlooked topic—a blind spot—in much social policy research and public discourse except when issues such as child protection online or peace and security seem to be concerned. Other front-page issues such as climate change, illegal immigration, corporate bailouts, human trafficking, genocide, or public health crises are presented as if they have little or nothing to do with communication policy issues such as freedom of expression, diversity of voices in the production and creation of media, and public access to information. In fact, media and telecommunications systems have become so fundamental, ubiquitous, and pervasive that we often take them for granted simply as enablers of many other freedoms, rights, and capabilities. Yet many do not realize the extent to which policies concerning communication resources such as cellphones and the Internet are quite vulnerable to fluctuating corporate and government interests or how these accidental or intended alliances shape other social policy issues.

We are willing to concede, but also lament, that elisions of communication policy issues in social policy discourse are understandable given the generally obscure and technical nature of the policy issues involved, especially those related to infrastructure. Recent examples include debates about "network neutrality" and the transition to digital television. Topics such as these tend to be framed in highly bureaucratic, procedural, and technocentric terms, so much so that discussions appear to be more about machines than about people. The acronyms alone leave most of us bewildered. Electronic privacy and surveillance; copyright and patents; equitable deployment of broadband services, community radio, and other media, such as cable TV access and technology centres in libraries, community centres, and schools—these issues are often presented as if they had little relation to a panoply of deeply interrelated communication policy issues, including industry ownership structures, radio frequency spectrum reform, digital convergence, technical standards, knowledge economy trade, network security, competition policy, media diversity, affordable and non-discriminatory telephone and broadband services, and Internet governance. One might well ask: what *do* any of these technically complex issues have to do with social and economic justice, gender and racial equity, or even human rights?

This discourse gap is precisely what this special issue of the *CJC* seeks to address: how communication policies affect economic justice, social justice, and human rights, and how these policies are being addressed by researchers and civil-society organizations in various parts of the Americas. Legislation, regulations, and judicial oversight

of institutional practices shape our electronic information and communications environment. Policy decisions affect the structure of industries that produce and deliver news and entertainment content using broadcasting, telephone, and Internet architecture. For example, debates over the supposed decline of traditional news media, struggles over digital copyright and privacy, and questions about ownership and control of the Internet and community radio, access to information necessary for citizenship, and the development of open source communication infrastructures to facilitate digital inclusion relate to social-policy concerns such as sustainable development, indigenous self-determination, immigration, environmental degradation, labour rights, gender equity, and other concerns across the Americas. These and other kinds of struggles are inextricable from media, communication, and information policies.

While on the surface quite diverse, the unifying thread that runs throughout the communication policy issues listed above is that each contributes in some way to defining the nature and scope of public access to and use of electronic (including digital) communication resources that are vital to our need to speak, to be heard and represented, and to participate in society. Collectively, communication policy decisions influence the viability of regulated and unregulated industries that *enable* electronic communication. They also determine the extent to which media and communications systems ease or hinder the flow of ideas and information.

Thus, for this special issue we sought submissions from experts working in academic and non-academic settings in the Americas that could make these connections more clear in two thematic areas: *policy contexts* and *policy responses*. And, given our interest in linking media and communications with social policy more generally, we were interested primarily in contributions that are informed by critical theory, social justice, and/or human rights or that feature praxis-oriented research capturing various challenges and/or opportunities for public-interest-oriented interventions in policy-making processes across the Americas.

Policy contexts

For policy contexts, we sought articles that describe either enabling or disabling legal and regulatory environments in which communication policymaking or advocacy are occurring. We were looking for syntheses of the current state of play related to communication policymaking that include attention to some of the issues noted earlier. Resulting contributions include three research papers, one project report, and a survey of policy contexts in several Latin American countries.

Martin Dowding's article "Interpreting Privacy on Campus: The Freedom of Information and Privacy and Ontario Universities" examines knowledge of the Ontario *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FIPPA) among students, faculty, and staff at two universities. FIPPA, designed to serve as a universally applied policymaking instrument to address a variety of campus privacy issues, including the protection of psychologically vulnerable students and of the personal information of both faculty and students, was misinterpreted by students and faculty alike. Through focus groups, Dowding also discovered that students were generally very uninformed about privacy issues in general and their privacy rights as students on campus. He raises some germane questions, such as asking what can be considered a reasonable expec-

tation of privacy in the era of social media, wherein many students willingly give up their right to privacy in order to participate in popular communities such as Facebook. As his research indicates, generational expectations and perceptions of privacy differ, and he concludes by arguing for a need to develop privacy education on campuses.

Copyright as a new form of economic and social policy is an increasingly contested site of global media policy, which Sara Bannerman's article "Canadian Copyright: History, Change, and Potential" meticulously documents through an historical look at the evolution and future of Canadian copyright law. Canada's attempts to meet the exigencies of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) Internet Treaties and in the face of several government dissolutions have left Canadian copyright legislation unchanged since 2002, with Bill C-32 (at the time of this writing) the most recent attempt to "reform" copyright. Copyright legislation is incredibly fraught and complex, with this internal struggle taking place alongside negotiations surrounding an Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) that would raise minimum standards of intellectual property enforcement at national borders and in digital networks, as well as the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), a proposed free-trade agreement with the European Union that would considerably extend Canadian copyright. Copyright reform has embroiled a variety of stakeholders in debate at national and global levels, in developed countries and in international development forums. Activists have been particularly concerned about the social justice issues surrounding intellectual property, including fair dealing in educational and non-profit arenas, and in developing an international standard for access to ICTs for the disabled community. As Bannerman argues, however, though Canada had an earlier opportunity to take a lead in socially progressive copyright reform, missed opportunities portend an erosion of Canadian copyright sovereignty and a potential Americanization of legislation through digital locks provisions. These are developments that Canadians should (and are) heeding, as Bill C-32 and CETA wind their way through legislative approval.

Evan Light's contribution, "From Pirates to Partners: The Legalization of Community Radio in Uruguay," details important transitions in community radio in Uruguay and the role of community media in democratization processes more generally. He focuses particular attention on documenting the role of civil-society leaders and organizations in bringing about regulatory change and innovative approaches to policymaking. Community radio began in Uruguay in the post-dictatorship years of the 1980s. Until December 2007, however, these stations were pirate broadcasters who had been excluded from the country's broadcasting system. Today, not only have these stations gained legal status, they have become active partners in the regulation of Uruguay's broadcasting system. Light's paper documents the development of community broadcasting, the role of civil society in bringing about regulatory change, and innovative approaches to policymaking.

We also feature two research reports that focus on additional types of policy contexts. The first is a profile by Chantal Hansen, Heng Sun, and Nigel Waters: "The Media Communications Environment Through a Spacial Lens: Mapping the Media in the Americas," which was developed to help address the scarcity of public information about the media sector in Latin America. Begun at the request of the Atlanta-based

Carter Center, this project used geographic information systems (GIS) technology to map media coverage, electoral results, and demographic profiles of 12 countries in the Americas. The goal was to provide essential electoral information to the citizens of these 12 countries and to promote transparency and understanding about the role and impact of the media in democratic processes.

Arne Hintz contributes a second policy-context report, "From Media Niche to Policy Spotlight: Mapping Community-Media Policy Change in Latin America," that maps some of the current trends in community media policy in Latin America, including specifics on Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Venezuela, Brazil, and Chile. Some of the most progressive and innovative community media policy has emanated from these countries, particularly through an expansion of citizen-led activist initiatives, the legalization of community initiatives, and infrastructural access to licence-allocation procedures. However, Hintz argues that state-led regulatory regimes must be understood in relation to international global regimes and currents.

Policy responses

We also sought contributions that addressed various kinds of policy responses to the types of policy contexts just described. We wanted to feature research that illuminates either failed or successful civil-society engagement (along with why and how, respectively) in any of the previously listed communication and social policy areas in terms of making policymaking more transparent, representative, and accountable. We sought to understand why and how communication policy matters to other social policy concerns and how civil-society organizations are working to effect policy change on both of these fronts, that is communication policy aligned with social policy. We also sought to go beyond discussion of journalism's role in society to consider today's *global* media landscape as one in which information creation, sharing, and exhibition includes not only traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television, websites, and blogs, but also news kiosks, billboards, community radio stations, satellite channels, movie theatres, mobile and wireless applications, and even Internet service providers.

Several case studies by Gwen Shaffer are featured in "Peering Ahead: An Examination of Peer-to-Peer Signal-Sharing Communities that Create Their Own Affordable Internet Access," where she looks at the work of 12 community networks in the U.S. that have set up peer-to-peer signal-sharing networks to meet digital inclusion needs. She details the many benefits of shared Wi-Fi for citizens and describes activists in the peer-to-peer networking movement who believe that free Internet access through bandwidth sharing is a viable way to meet the broadband needs of their communities and that community-owned and -managed infrastructure can ameliorate digital divides. However, given the political economic realities that favour incumbent telecom providers and market imperatives over peer-to-peer providers that encourage civic engagement and deliberative discourse, the risk of volunteer burnout, and the need to market the projects to the community, the fate and longevity of peer-to-peer networks is potentially precarious. In addition, as Shaffer points out, the informants in her study were overwhelmingly male, perhaps a reflection of the current composition of the

peer-to-peer movement, so a major challenge will be to create a more inclusive community peer-to-peer activists.

In "Metaphors for Democratic Communication Spaces: How Developers of Local Wireless Networks Frame Technology and Urban Space," Alison Powell describes how communications policies, like many other social policies, are founded on an ideal of democracy yet do not always live up to that ideal. In the case of local wireless networks, the democracy frame is used to increase access to and autonomy of communication infrastructure as aspects of more democratic public spheres. Her article analyzes how such metaphors are deployed in the case of local wireless-networking projects to produce more democratic communication spaces. Using examples from Canada, Montréal, and Fredericton, her article critiques the narrow approach to democratization of communication spaces inherent in networks that attempt to open up technology for more citizens to create more inclusive public access. She also demonstrates how shifts in the framing and design of urban technology projects have an impact on local wireless, as well as many other projects aimed at democratizing communications or otherwise advancing social justice aims.

Rob McMahon's article, "The Institutional Development of Indigenous Broadband Infrastructure in Canada and the United States: Two Paths 'Digital Self-Determination'," examines the contours of "digital self-determination" for indigenous groups in North America. He analyzes policy development and implementation of community-based broadband infrastructure programs for Native American groups in the United States and First Nations communities in Canada in the wake of national broadband development programs and policies in both countries. He argues that broadband infrastructure development is a tangible mechanism for indigenous peoples to exercise self-determination, a claim they have vociferously argued in various recent policy processes related to broadband development. A community informatics approach to broadband development policy—wherein autonomy is solidified at the local level, with participatory governance an abiding factor—is, as McMahon argues, an intrinsic facet of digital self-determination.

A research report and two conference reports round out our interest in linking the topic of communication policy in the Americas with broader social policy concerns and issues. For example, a précis, "Democratizing Communication Policy in Canada: A Social Movement Perspective," by Robert Hackett and Steve Anderson of their research funded by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) Necessary Knowledge for a Democratic Public Sphere program, details how academics and activists collaborated on policy-specific research designed to support more democratic media regulation and media justice. Hackett partnered with OpenMedia.ca to look at issues and trends in the nascent media reform movement in Canada. The authors question how best to link the wider social justice community in Canada with specific media democratization issues, how to address challenges in sustainability and funding for media reform in Canada, and specific media reform issues that are of high interest. They use resource mobilization theory to extrapolate from the results of their survey and focus groups. Their report also seeks to understand the current contours of the appetite for media reform in Canada and to consider the possible "affective lens" with which to

engage a wider citizenry in these issues (for example, the tropes of "open media" and "openness").

Nicole Cohen, Sonja Macdonald, Patricia Mazepa, and David Skinner report on their public conference called "Making Media Public: From Discussion to Action?" held at York University in Toronto in May 2010. This conference brought together academics, community members, activists, labour organizations, and the general public to consider various issues related to the media in Canada: the sustainability of public media; the "crisis" in journalism because of recessionary economics and huge layoffs in the journalism sector; digital policy issues such as access, copyright, Net neutrality, and the digital television transition; new media entrants operating on co-operative and collaborative governance and funding models; and new models of media literacy. While providing an overview of the conference themes, the authors also offer suggestions that emanated from the conference about future initiatives to "make media (more) public," including opportunities in education, organization, co-ordination, and mobilization.

Another conference report details how the gender gap in the Canadian film and television industry—in labour representation, the "glass ceiling," and lacklustre policy responses—was the impetus for Women in View's "Sex, Money and Media" conference held at Simon Fraser University in October 2010. Co-organizers Catherine Murray and Alison Beale provide an overview of the event in "Sex Money, Media: A Tribute and Political Reflection," which brought together filmmakers and other creative producers, academics, representatives from non-profit groups, and others working in the creative industries. As they argue, to date there is little empirical evidence on the status and representation of gender in the Canadian creative mediascape from funding bodies and academics, but what evidence does exist still points to prevailing systemic inequities. Murray and Beale argue that feminist political economists must theorize and dissect the current market-led agenda and, in tandem with the creators themselves, interject gender-based supports and imagine innovative platforms for displaying creative work, while also intervening at strategic policy moments to put gender equity back on the table.

Finally, we chose to feature several book reviews to focus attention on how communication policymaking matters to issues of race, class, and gender; we also wanted to feature new work that navigates the boundaries between policy contexts and academic or civil-society responses to those contexts.

To address the former, we feature reviews of *Making Our Media: Global Initiatives Toward a Democratic Public Sphere*, two important volumes recently released and edited by scholars, Clemencia Rodriguez, Dorothy Kidd, and Laura Stein, well known for their critical work on community media and media policy activism. Elizabeth (Liz) Miller reviews *Volume One: Creating New Communication Spaces,* while Paula Chakravartty reviews *Volume Two: National and Global Movements for Democratic Communication.* Both volumes stem from the editors' involvement with the transnational network OURMedia/Nuestros Medios, a global group of activists, academics, and community media practitioners. Both volumes are lengthy (*Volume One,* 13 chapters; *Volume Two,* 11 chapters), with contributions by established and emergent scholars and practitioners. *Volume One*, with its focus on making media, was assigned to Miller,

whose research-creation expertise and networks intersect with OURMedia, and *Volume Two*, with its focus on policy, to Chakravartty, whose research expertise concerns global media policy. Both reviewers were asked to provide a critical overview of the edited volumes, but also a conclusion pointing to areas, strategies, and ways to move the conversation forward opened up by the books in terms of scholarship and activism.

To address academic and civil-society responses to policy contexts, we also feature a review by Milton Mueller (Professor and Director of the Telecommunications Network Management Program at the Syracuse University School of Information Studies and the chair of the Global Internet Governance Academic Network/GigaNet) of *Communications Research in Action: Scholar-Activist Collaborations for a Democratic Public Sphere.* This edited collection from Philip Napoli (head of the Donald McGannon Communication Research Center at Fordham University) and Minna Aslama (Affiliated Scholar at McGannon and former staffer at the SSRC, which supported Hackett's work noted earlier) retrospectively examines the SSRC's Necessary Knowledge for a Democratic Public Sphere program, which was funded in large part by the Ford Foundation to bring together academics and activists to collaborate on policy-specific research. More than a mere book review, Mueller's contribution considers the wider issues endemic to scholarly–activist collaborations centred on communication policy research. How researchers interact and intersect with activism is discussed at length by Mueller, who intersperses his review of the chapters with a variety of scholarly references on the topic.

Overall, we feel this collection of articles will be of particular interest to scholars and practitioners who are seeking to develop tangible links to policy and grass-roots networks for their academic interests. Indeed, this special issue of the *CJC* comprises the work of several new scholars whose activist passions and commitment to media policies that serve the public interest are well reflected here. While we were somewhat disappointed not to receive as many submissions from outside North America as we would have liked, the contributions here offer a vibrant examination of some of the reasons opening up technological infrastructures to greater public scrutiny matters because this creates more inclusive online access and educates stakeholders on new policy developments that affect their daily lives. As we send this to press, we hope this special issue makes a contribution to the numerous other collaborations that are also working hard to link research, teaching, and advocacy on communication policy issues. We hope that this trend continues and contributes to more progress in this area.

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Roberta G. Lentz, McGill University
Leslie Regan Shade, Concordia University