Teaching Communication Policy: Pedagogy in Brief

Philip Savage
McMaster University

Abstract: This article summarizes a Canadian Communication Association round table session in June 2006 that brought together some of Canada’s leading instructors of communication policy: Paul Audley (Schulich School of Business, York University), Pierre Bélanger (Department of Communication, University of Ottawa), Vanda Rideout (Department of Sociology, University of New Brunswick), Liora Salter (Osgoode Hall Law School, York University), and David Skinner (Communication Studies, York University). The participants in the session provided insight around six key issues in teaching policy: 1) Challenges, 2) Definitions, 3) Making It Contemporary, 4) Including History, 5) Including a Future, and 6) Reading, Writing, and Role-Play.

Résumé : Cet article offre un résumé d’une table ronde de l’Association Canadienne de Communication qui a eu lieu en juin 2006 et qui a réuni quelques uns des professeurs de premier plan en matière de politiques de communication : Paul Audley (Schulich School of Business, Université York), Pierre Bélanger (Département de communication, Université d’Ottawa), Vanda Rideout (Département de sociologie, Université du Nouveau-Brunswick), Liora Salter (Osgoode Hall Law School, Université York), et David Skinner (Communications, Université York). Les participants à la séance ont exploré six problématiques clé en ce qui a trait à l’enseignement des politiques de communication : 1) Défis, 2) Définitions, 3) Actualiser l’enseignement, 4) Inclure l’Histoire, 5) Inclure le futur, et 6) Lire, écrire et jeu de jeu de rôle.

Keywords: Policy; Broadcasting policy; Telecommunications policy; Regulation/ CRTC

Introduction
On June 1, 2006, a round table panel on teaching communication policy was held...
at York University in Toronto as part of the annual Canadian Communication Association (CCA) conference. On the panel were five instructors who together have more than half a century of experience in the area: Paul Audley (Schulich School of Business, York University), Pierre Bélanger (Department of Communication and Institute of Canadian Studies, University of Ottawa), Vanda Rideout (Department of Sociology, University of New Brunswick), Liora Salter (Osgoode Hall Law School, York University), and David Skinner (Communication Studies, York University). (More detailed biographies of the participants can be found in the appendix.) Therefore the authors of this summary of remarks are really Paul, Pierre, Vanda, Liora, and David as much as myself (as well as a range of active audience members—new and older faculty as well as graduate students). However, I was privileged to be chair of the session and was invited to try to sum things up. The session started that June afternoon with a somewhat personal admission of what had brought us together.

Philip Savage: The genesis of this panel was that a year ago I applied for a job to teach at McMaster University, and lo and behold, they were silly enough to hire me. One of the four courses I was to teach for the first time was a policy course. And although about four months before that I had actually been doing policy work at the CBC, largely for CBC Radio, but some work for CBC TV and CBC.ca, and I had taken some great policy courses in my day—including from a couple of people on this panel, Liora and Paul—I thought, “I’ve got to talk to a few people about really how one teaches policy and how one gets people interested in learning about policy.” So I started asking around and one of the first people I talked to was David Skinner at York. Together we came up with a few questions that we thought maybe would be worthwhile to put to a panel of people who had a range of experiences teaching policy from across Canada, in different circumstances, at different levels, at different times.

The main questions had to do with the unique challenges of teaching the subject, how one overcomes them, and what support one draws on to teach communication policy in Canada. This summary highlights the key issues that emerged, using wherever possible the conversational presentation style panellists actually used, around six key issues: 1) Challenges, 2) Definitions, 3) Making It Contemporary, 4) Including History, 5) Including a Future, and 6) Reading, Writing, and Role-Play.

There are two quick points by way of introduction to the round table. First, there has been relatively little written on the pedagogy of teaching communication in Canada. Will Straw wrote for this journal an article on teaching critical media analysis, but that was 20 years ago (Straw, 1985). Paul Attallah and Leslie Regan Shade’s edited collection Mediascapes (2002) contains in its early chapters some very useful overviews of Communication Studies in Canada, including thoughtful observations on the central role of policy research in the overall development of Canadian communication studies. However, there is little specifically on the pedagogy of communication policy. The closest is Vincent Mosco’s article in the same 1985 edition of the Canadian Journal of Communication, “Teaching Telecommunications Policy, Critically” (Mosco, 1985). It provides a good explana-
tion of the ideological underpinnings of approaches to policy, especially in terms of the instrumentalist versus structuralist approaches, but offers little in terms of practical pedagogy. It takes a narrower approach to the content area—telecommunications—than most of us teach in Canadian undergraduate courses.

Second, the discussion on teaching communication policy appears to be welcomed. Palpable appreciation of the June 2006 round table reflected in the discussion emerging as much from the audience in the York University seminar room as from the panellists. Note the remarks of two audience members who themselves have significant experience in the area.

Fred Fletcher (Director of the York/Ryerson Joint Graduate Programme in Communication and Culture): Let me say how much I’ve enjoyed this panel. We spend a lot of time at academic conferences talking about one half of our lives—our research lives. We don’t talk about the other half very often.

Marc Raboy (Beaverbrook Chair in Ethics, Media, and Communications, McGill University): I really appreciate all the comments of the panellists, because I, too, have tried to teach communication policy for about 20 years and have a lot of the same joys and the frustrations that were expressed here.

Challenges

David Skinner started the discussion by setting out the challenge of getting undergraduate students interested in Canadian communication policy.

David Skinner: So the challenge really is to peak their interest in policy at the undergraduate level. And really, the biggest problem I always find is actually getting their attention. At the outset students usually think that policy is a dry, arcane subject. And given, on one hand, both the rise of neoliberal ideology, which has a general content for the hand of government in social life, and on the other hand the basic anarchistic predispositions of social activists coming up today, policy seems to be a particularly difficult subject to teach at this time.

To which the other two mainly undergraduate instructors added their perspectives.

Pierre Bélanger: One of the key issues today with policy is, you’re talking to a generation for whom policy doesn’t ring any bells. “What are you talking about? Regulating my media behaviour and consumption? I live in a universe where everything is allowed. I download music, we peercast, we clipcast, we mashup, we trade information back and forth. We live in a universe where we go unchecked.”

Vanda Rideout: Like the other colleagues at the round table have explained, the word “policy” is almost the kiss of death in the title of a course where you want to teach them what’s going on.

Definitions

Liora Salter, who has taught policy to a range of undergraduate and now to a mix of graduate students (in law, environmental studies, and communication), believes
the definition of policy lies at the heart of the problems in teaching policy. Students come into policy courses with odd notions about what constitutes policy—notions that may obscure more than they reveal.

Liora Salter: Number one problem is the expectations of students that the word “policy” could refer to a range of things, including content of what the CRTC or the Government of Canada [does]. Or it could be referring to the process by which people are making decisions—an entirely different option. Or it could, like Philip suggested, refer to what people who have the word “policy” in the title of their jobs do every day when they do policy. And those are all very different things. . . . So students come into my class not knowing which angle they’re coming in at. And the first job is to say what angle I’m going to come in at, which is the how of policy, the how of decision-making. . . . I say, instead of the word “policy” we’re going to look at decisions that are made about an issue.

Paul Audley defines his policy approach with students in a similar way. Implicitly he uses Salter’s definition of policy as the process of decision-making on issues. Audley, however, gets the students to focus first on the motivations of some of the players who make the decisions.

Paul Audley: One of the first things that I try to do is to get them to think about what the devil anybody is trying to accomplish when they establish regulations or put in place tax incentives or public agencies or direct funding programs or copyright law. . . . So I try to begin to just get them to think about why on earth would anyone be involved? . . . Then I like to get students to think about, and to come to terms with, why exactly the policies that are in place, whether it’s CRTC regulation or the policies for the magazine industry or whatever it is, why were those implemented? What did they think they were going to accomplish? What did they say they were going to accomplish? How was each part of the package supposed to work?

And partly because of my own peculiar background, which goes back three decades I guess, of being involved in public policy, working closely with government, drafting cabinet papers, drafting various and sundry public reports, I like to try to explain to them the dynamics of the public-policy process. When there’s pressure for a change, who is it coming from? How do they exercise that pressure? What actually happens within the structure of government? And I think it brings the process to life and makes people realize that there’s a continuing contest of interests and you can call what comes out in the end policy, but as far as its objectives are concerned it’s never a very clean project. It’s a bit like making sausage—you don’t really want to know how it was done.

Making it contemporary
Pierre Bélanger’s way of solving the problem of policy’s perceived irrelevance also tends toward a focus on decision-making in Canadian communication settings. In his case, he makes the discussion of those decisions contemporary to the lives of the undergraduate students themselves.

Pierre Bélanger: My universe is one of emerging technologies in the con-
text of both public broadcasting and private broadcasting, as well as media industries as a whole in the country. So I’m mostly looking at the world through a very pragmatic lens, in the sense that in the courses that I teach, media industries and public spaces, we look at case studies basically. We look at issues, at problems, at developments, and we look at what’s around them, what’s at stake, the various protagonists in these issues, and essentially look at them for what they stand for and what they mean.

Bélanger has an interesting approach to dealing with policy vis-à-vis old versus new media.

Pierre Bélanger: It is interesting that Liora said that she’s banned the word “policy” from her teaching. I banned the word “new” when I talk about media. I prefer to talk about emerging media now, because how long will your new camera remain “new” and your new laptop remain “new”? Every season there’s an emerging model, an emerging application, and emerging platforms. So I think that’s a better descriptor of it.

Including history

In response to a range of panellists talking about policy and contemporary media habits, a discussion emerged about placing this in a historical context. Marc Raboy, as an audience member, started the discussion.

Marc Raboy: What really struck me in the presentations is how at one end of the table there was an emphasis on contemporary issues, how to engage students in contemporary issues. And as we moved down the table, by the time we got to the end there was more of a focus on historical perspectives. . . . To make the history interesting you have to relate it to what is going on today. And to get any kind of grip on what’s going on today you really have to understand history. And one of the first things that I tell my students when I teach Canadian broadcasting policy is that you know what the issues are, you have a sense of the issues and the technologies.

David Skinner pointed out that in his courses he also places policy in a very broad historical context.

David Skinner: I address the issue of building initial interest by placing policy in a kind of broad historical context and illustrating, of course, that broadcast and communications policy is really a struggle over the very idea of Canada. . . . I do use a lot of history, but that’s one of the things I think that’s really important, is to instil in students some idea of history and about how communication is a history of a struggle of ideas and that communication policy is all basically to a large part about establishing the relations of production for a communicative space where ideas can be produced. So it’s about establishing basically relations of production practices of representative communicative resources in a historical context.

Paul Audley added his own dimension on history with a take on policy and the bilingual nature of Canada.

Paul Audley: It’s also fun, by the way, as part of walking them through the process, to help them understand the sort of English/French dimension of
policymaking in Canada. And to appreciate the fact that one of the reasons
Canadian policies look the way they do is because it’s a bilingual country
and because there’s always been a desire to attract votes in Québec. And
one of the things that kept the Mulroney government honest, for sure, was
that they had a lot of members in Québec. They had important powerful
cabinet ministers. I worked for one of them. And it meant that there was a
very serious concern to address these issues, perhaps even more because
we were engaged in free-trade negotiations. . . . But that’s the kind of thing
though that I think is fun, for people to understand, that this stuff isn’t just
something that fell out of the sky.

Fred Fletcher got into the discussion at this point to talk about how he uses his-
tory to also deal with the earlier policy definition problem.

Fred Fletcher: I teach a third-year class for about 20 years now, called The
Politics of Communication and Culture in Canada. . . . You could say I
teach a disguised policy course, because I don’t tell them it’s about policy.
I tell them it’s about the problems that Canada is facing and of course its
historical development, and that has to do with communication and culture.
And I ask them to consider how Canada tried to solve those problems, what
options were available, what would have happened if they had been
responded to differently. . . . [The result is that students] understand policy
not as something that is handed down by some faceless bureaucrats, but
something that grows out of the history of problems that society faces. I
think they understand that. They seem to.

Paul Audley added that the policy history must not be presented simply as a
“dismal” history.

Paul Audley: One of the things that I’ve always tried to do, because it can
get to be a very dismal kind of subject if you just make people feel that this
stuff all is destined to fail, that in fact nothing works, is to back up and look
at areas where initiatives have worked. And we may have had lots of diffi-
culties with magazine industry policy, and on the newsstand you may not
see a hell of a lot of magazines, but about 50% of the magazines sold in
Canada are Canadian magazines.

Including a future
Once the instructors have taught that the decision-making in Canadian communica-
tion policy is historically contextualized, they tend also to face students’ percep-
tions that the future of policy is irrelevant. Audience member David Clifton
(part-time instructor and graduate student at York University) put it well, talking
about a challenge he faces in his teaching.

David Clifton: [T]here’s this feeling on the part of younger undergraduate
students. . . that policy regimes are inherently in decline, that in 10 or 15
years there will be no communications policy. And, as such, you know,
while they’re interested in learning it, they don’t seem to respect the course
as something that will be relevant in the future. I’m torn with trying to set
the historical context for them while at the same time trying to somehow
get the point across that these are regimes that will very much carry for-
ward into the future, albeit in a different form, but that policy is historically rooted but not the stuff of history.

Liora Slater responded that those students who express scorn for any current or future role of governments in regulation might spur further conversations about the broad role of policy:

*Liora Salter:* A student walked into my office before I started teaching one time and said he didn’t believe in government. And he got an A, interestingly enough—from me, more interestingly. And this goes back to what Paul said earlier and several other people have said. I said, “I don’t care what you believe. At the end of the day, you may want to abolish it all [government regulation and policy]. But you have to understand at the end of the day why the CRTC [exists], what they thought they were trying to do, why they thought it was important to do it, and why they chose the approach they chose.”

Paul Audley echoed Salter:

*Paul Audley:* When I get a really bright dissident student who just doesn’t buy any of this, what I try to do is to get them to think through it. That is, that you have to have a policy to decide to *get rid of the CRTC*. It is a policy *not* to regulate in any way; not to regulate telecommunication in any way, that’s a policy. It’s a potential policy not to protect copyright, to say we don’t do intellectual property any longer in this area. But if you want to get a good grade from me, you have to then talk about where that would take you, what are the implications of that. Think it out. Nobody is going to change that policy without at least thinking a little bit. Well, I mean the most doctrinaire politician, not that we have any of those in Ottawa, but the most doctrinaire may just do it anyway without thinking about it. But you can’t do that in my class and get a good grade. You’ve got to tell me: Where does this take you? What are the implications? What sort of values does it reflect to do that?

**Reading, writing, and role-play**

In a short session like this there was very little time to discuss in any depth specific pedagogical tools for instruction and evaluation. Panellists did share some brief remarks about the importance of reading, about writing techniques, and about active policymaking through case studies or role-playing. All the participants agreed that policy courses were a great way to get undergraduates (and even graduates) to read a daily newspaper.

*David Skinner:* I bring in newspaper clippings, usually from the *Globe and Mail*. Many of them, of course, being first-year communications students who have never opened a newspaper. . . . That’s always a big surprise for them to actually see that there are things in the newspaper that apply to what they’re doing and that policy is reflected in the newspaper.

*Liora Salter:* The first thing I make people do is read newspapers. And there David and I come together.

Building a reading list for students can be a challenge. Some of the instructors
use their own overview writings or lectures to set a framework for the policy decision-making process. (Paul Audley uses his own 1994 Canadian Journal of Communication article, “Cultural Industries Policy: Objectives, Formulation, and Evaluation” [Audley, 1994].) There was some disagreement on whether one could employ an all-in-one text. This strategy was effectively ruled out by those teaching graduate seminars but considered by at least one undergraduate instructor.

*Vanda Rideout:* We need a textbook. I think we do. For me it would be one that starts to integrate... the different institutional approaches that have taken place in this country—telecommunication policy and also broadcasting—and I would add the cultural aspect as well. And even though I understand that they are policy dimensions that are still somewhat separate, there are commonalities in terms of policy approaches that could be addressed in that kind of a book.

A journal approach to writing was one way the undergraduate instructors in particular allow for a reflection on the decision-making process occurring on key issues.

*Pierre Bélanger:* An electronic journal, whereby I literally not only encouraged but forced—imposed—upon my students to write a one-page critical essay a week on an issue that pertains to the development of the media industry at large, but even more importantly, because that’s my focus, on emerging technologies. So I get them to tell me what they think of such-and-such a situation... For me, as Liora was saying, that’s my contribution to helping this generation discover the value of reading and following the daily activities of communication.

Finally, returning to the challenge of making communication policy relevant and engaging for students, a number of instructors spoke about the value of case studies and having students actually “do policy” either through role-play or, if possible, through co-op placements.

*David Skinner:* I’ve noticed at York, it seems to be that fewer students here seem to see some kind of policy-related activity as a career option than students at other places. At Simon Fraser [University], for instance, a lot of students really seem to think that policy would be an interesting place to work. And the only difference I can see is the co-op program. Maybe having students, getting them out, getting them into work situations, so they can see how interesting these kinds of things can be, that that’s really a good way to actually spur that interest and build that interest.

In the absence of co-op programs or a class small enough to do role-playing, a number of instructors spoke about having actual policy players come to speak in class.

*Pierre Bélanger:* So I’d say on average once a year someone comes into one of our courses and engages in a discussion. This past week we had the CEO of TVO, because in our Media and Public Spaces class, the fact that TVO is now under the Ministry of Education, it changes a great deal the mandate and the operation of that public broadcaster. So the CEO accepted to come and talk to our students for three hours. You get students to literally debate with those whose mandate it is to implement those policies and
the changes that the Minister of Education of Ontario would benefit TVO. That’s one of the issues.

Conclusion
Finally, on the subject of bringing policy players to the students, the chair added a final comment at the round table.

*Philip Savage:* So I started teaching my first policy course, quickly realizing that one of the things you do if you don’t know exactly what you’re teaching is you bring in as many people to talk instead of you. And Trina McQueen, who is teaching as the York University CTV Chair of Broadcast Management, kindly agreed to come to Hamilton. She said, “I’m not sure what I will say fits in your course.” As it turns out, all the other guest speakers—from the CBC and from newspapers, et cetera—had done their PowerPoint on the state of the media and key issues. Instead Trina used no PowerPoint but said to the students, “Okay, I’m just going to talk for 20 minutes on five key decisions I had to make at different times in my broadcast experience [at CBC, CTV, and Discovery] and what the context for those decisions was.” Well, now we’re three-quarters of the way through the course and the students are getting it! They hear Trina and say, “Oh, there’s all these factors we’ve been studying that impact decision-making. . .” So it’s all about that context of the decision-making. That teaching moment had little of me in it but it was very exciting, and, more importantly, it connected with the students.

The CCA Round Table on Teaching Policy began a conversation among panelists and teaching colleagues about how to connect with students and engage them in the application of policy insights to the current Canadian political and economic structures. All of the participants hope that the conversation on building a constantly improving pedagogy of communication policy will continue. We look forward to further discussion through both the meetings of the CCA and the pages of the *Canadian Journal of Communication*.

Appendix: Biographies of Participants

*Paul Audley* is President of Paul Audley & Associates Ltd. He has taught communication policy in the Schulich School of Business at York University and is the author of *Canada’s Cultural Industries: Broadcasting, Publishing, Records and Film* (1983). He has been closely involved in a range of public-policy development, including as Executive Director of the federal Task Force on Broadcasting Policy (1986) and Research Director of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Communications and Culture, leading up to development of the 1991 Broadcasting Act. His research company specializes in the integration of cultural and economic factors in the development of public policies affecting the publishing, film, sound recording, and broadcasting industries.

*Pierre Bélanger* is Professor of Communication at the University of Ottawa. His ongoing research interests include public spaces and the digitization of information; digitization strategies of the Canadian Heritage Department; Canadian media industries; and Canadian broadcasting and telecommunication policy. Pierre Bélanger is the co-author with Sylvain LaFrance of *La radio à l’ère de la conver-
gence (2001). He acts as a consultant to public and private broadcasters in Canada relating to technological development and public policy.

**Vanda Rideout** is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of New Brunswick. Her main research interests include the impact that information and communication technologies have on non-government organizations; the repercussions of the digital divide on the rural and remote areas of Canada; as well as telecommunication and multimedia public policy. She is the author of *Continentalizing Canadian Telecommunications: The Politics of Regulatory Reform* (2003). She has extensive telecommunication business and government expertise, having worked in the 1970s and 1980s with Northern Telecom, and consulted in the 1990s with the federal Department of Communications and Industry Canada, among others.

**Liora Salter** is Professor of Politics and Policy, cross-appointed with the Faculty of Environmental Studies, at York University and Osgoode Hall Law School. Her prolific writing in both the academic and governmental spheres makes Liora Salter a well-known expert in the areas of communication and interdisciplinary research. Among the several books she has authored are *Interdisciplinary Research: Issues and Problems* (1996), *Mandated Science* (1986), and *Communication Studies in Canada* (1981). She has also written numerous articles with respect to regulation and public policy in Canada. She has prepared various technical briefs for provincial, territorial, and federal government departments. In total, she has been a consultant to eight Royal Commissions, and in 1992 her professional contributions were recognized by a Fellowship of the Royal Society of Canada. Her Osgoode Hall web profile reads: “in 1992 her professional contributions were recognized with an appointment as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. http://www.osgoode.yorku.ca/faculty/Salter_R_L_Liora.html.

**Philip Savage** is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies and Multimedia at McMaster University. His research interests include broadcasting policy, audience research, and the political economy of media. Before returning to teaching in 2005, Philip Savage worked in various research, policy, and planning roles at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, including Head of Research, English Radio, and Senior Manager of Policy and Planning for CBC English Television, Radio, and New Media.

**David Skinner** is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at York University. Before coming to York he was the founding chair of the Bachelor of Journalism at Thompson Rivers University (formerly the University College of the Cariboo) and taught undergraduate communication courses at five Canadian universities. His research interests include political economy of communication, media and communication policy, alternative and community media, and media democracy. He is the co-editor of *Converging Media, Diverging Interests: A Political Economy of News in the United States and Canada* (2005).

**Acknowledgments**
The author wishes to thank the York-Ryerson Joint Programme in Communication, through David Skinner’s good graces, for covering the cost of transcription, and Jeremy Stolow, McMaster University, for the loan of technical equipment to record the round table.
References