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Editorial: Understanding media policy in the 21st century: affirmation, challenge, re-constitution

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Editorial on the Research Topic

Understanding media policy in the 21st century: affirmation, challenge, re-constitution

Media policy plays a central role in shaping the evolution of the structure and functioning of media systems and the public sphere. A key feature of media policy evolution concerns debates about the future of often long-established but now questioned systems of media governance and regulation. Another is the consideration of how the course of evolution of newer media technologies and associated infrastructures and services might be steered to maximize their commercial, cultural and societal value, whilst minimizing their apparent and potential negative repercussions for the public sphere of democratic societies. In understanding the opportunities and problems arising from the functioning of established and newer media as well as platforms, there is no doubt that media policy makers currently face some of the greatest challenges in the history of mass and personal communication. For scholars, this not only makes the study of media policies of various kinds compelling, but also points to the potential value of scholarly research in contributing to—and assisting the resolution of—key policy debates on the future structure and functioning of the media system in its established and newer hybrid forms. Academic research on media policy is thus constantly in search of refined and new ways of determining causal relationships, characterizing complex phenomena, and providing solutions to deliver better understandings of fast-evolving communications environments (Simpson et al., 2016). In so doing, media policy scholars in their work aim to establish and determine the significance of, variously: key matters of debate and controversy in our media system; the core positions taken and strategies and actions deployed by policy actors of various kinds and from various quarters; and the key policy outcomes from media policy processes and their consequences and implications.

The eight articles in this Research Topic reflect much of this approach to media policy scholarship. Whilst their subject matter illustrates the breadth of coverage of contemporary media policy research, the articles also coalesce around two fundamental concerns of 21st century media policy research: ongoing research on the value and governance of well-established private and public service media; and, by contrast, the features and consequences of the rise of online digital platforms. Regarding the former, articles in this Research Topic address the key issues of transparency; prominence; journalistic values;

subsidization of news content; and public media lobbying activity. Regarding the latter, the Research Topic provides contributions on the highly topical matters of the relationship between digital platforms and news publishers; digital propaganda; and digital sovereignty.

“Legacy media”—both private corporations and public service media—continue to be an extensively researched aspect of media policy. In an increasingly marketized and commercialized media environment, PSM not only is more than ever asked to justify the public resources allocated to its provision, but its online remit is subject to heated debates. Moreover, the financial crisis of many private news media turned the introduction, continuation and reform of media subsidies into a highly contentious subject as well. Kammer and Blach-Ørsten in their treatment of subsidized new media innovation provide evidence from the Danish case that subsidized new news media have tended to establish themselves in the market in a sustained way, even if they may not be widely recognized news brands by consumers. In a different context, Van de Elst et al. in their exploration of the application of the EU’s Audiovisual Media Services Directive in Flanders, focus on the application of rules on ensuring prominence of general interest broadcast services. They sound a cautionary note on the need to produce clear media policy measures as well as the need to monitor their implementation and performance by showing how differences of perspective evident between broadcasters and hardware manufacturers can create challenges in securing the prominence of general interest services on online digital interfaces. Van den Bulck et al. in their contribution to the Research Topic argue persuasively for a radical re-think of the principle of transparency in public service media and present a framework that, if properly applied, can create much-needed robust, participatory practices that these authors argue can deliver long term organizational sustainability. Ali and Forde provide interesting insights into the public television lobbying process in the US, the success of which is crucial to maintain already very limited public service provision. With a particular focus on the debate on the ATSC 3.0 broadcast technical standard, they show the complex relationships that can exist between the strategic interests of lobbying firms and the welfare of organizations on whose behalf they are working, reaching the concerning conclusion that the welfare of US broadcast stations has been compromised by the profit maximizing motivations of lobbying interests that are supposed to act on their behalf. Prieto-Arosa and d’Haenens explore the challenges for PSM providers of engaging with younger audiences. They reach the interesting conclusion from their case study of the Belgian public service broadcaster, RTBF, that the integration of core journalistic principles as early as possible in content development does not, in fact, damage the image of the broadcaster and even can enhance its credibility in the eyes of younger audience members, thus contributing to growth of critical and well-informed perspectives in these audiences.

The digital platform world, though by now well-established, continues to be a vital matter of concern to both media policy makers and media policy scholars. Recent years have witnessed a fierce, often controversial and as yet unresolved, debate on the commercial arrangements for the hosting of news content on digital platforms. Iosifidis contributes to this in his article by finding

that both news media providers and digital platforms benefit from the distribution of news content on platforms but urging a more transparent relationship to be developed between the two in order to sustain the much needed public interest functions of journalism into the future. Rather differently, though no less important, Yildirim-Vranckaert and Hyzen explore the complex and growing phenomenon of digital propaganda and how consumers of content can navigate the well-documented platform world where mis- and disinformation proliferate. Their article innovates through the positing of a new theoretical model of mental autonomy containing both protective and freedom-enabling characteristics that, it is argued, can assist policy makers in creating measures to address the problems that arise from online propaganda. Musiani’s contribution to the Research Topic addresses the vital matter of digital sovereignty through the deployment of an “infrastructuring” perspective that, from a media policy stance, recognizes the series of practices, tensions and debates built into media infrastructures of various kinds. The still very much evolving character of our understanding of digital sovereignty from a media policy perspective leads Musiani to recommend more research on, in particular, European and US approaches to digital sovereignty that are displaying key similarities and differences. The debate on digital sovereignty and its consequences is likely to be germane to the future of global media development in the coming decades and is thus crucial to engage with from a scholarly perspective.

Taken together, the contributions assembled in this Research Topic demonstrate that media policy research in the 21st century is necessarily concerned both with the governance of established structures like public service media and legacy private media, and with the pressures of emerging transformations. In this respect, the field simultaneously addresses the ongoing salience of institutional arrangements, regulatory frameworks, governance principles and entrenched debates that continue to shape the conditions of media production, dissemination, and use, while also interrogating the emergence of new dynamics associated with processes such as algorithmization, datafication, and platformization that introduce new actors, shaking up established and generating new policy and governance challenges. Although the latter more frequently command public attention, the former remain of equal, and perhaps under-acknowledged, significance not only as the terrain upon which current policy processes unfold but also as the foundations upon which the scholarly study of media policy continues to build.

Author contributions

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