

## PROMOTING PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE OF MEDIA POLICY RESEARCH

### A Report on the July 2008 Stockholm Pre-Conference of the IAMCR Task Force on Media and Communication Policy

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In July 2008, IAMCR members met in Stockholm for a one-day pre-conference on the theme of “Promoting Public Knowledge of Media Policy Research.” The intended focus was on how to increase and improve the public understanding of the findings of media and communication policy research. The challenge of making the implications of arcane policy discourses accessible and relevant to affected populations is profound, especially because highly concentrated media companies with vested interests in particular policy outcomes cannot be expected to serve as impartial outlets for such information. But there is great value in strategizing how such knowledge can be created and effectively disseminated.

The bulk of the day was dedicated to four 90-minute roundtables on the subjects of:

- *Asking the right questions: Policy relevance and the public interest* (speakers: Andrew Calabrese, Jo Bardoel, Philip Napoli)
- *The IAMCR/UNESCO research agenda* (speakers: Robin Mansell, Hopeton Dunn, Thomas Tufte)
- *Policy mapping as a resource for media policy activism* (speakers: Marc Raboy, Arne Hintz, Claudia Padovani)
- *Strategies for promoting public knowledge about media policy* (speakers: Jo Karaganis, Kate Coyer)

In addition, Kaarle Nordenstreng, David Goldberg, Ingela Svedin and others in attendance made valuable interventions into the discussions. Nordenstreng gave an invited presentation on the intellectual history of media and communication studies that showed an increased tendency towards political apathy in recent times, but he also characterized the current younger generation of scholars as showing more positive signs of interest in and engagement with media politics and policy. He cited the Task Force’s efforts as a welcome movement in that direction.

What follows are brief highlights of each of the main sessions.

1. *Asking the right questions*: Many policy researchers believe that they have a duty to seek “policy relevance” in their work, but this begs the question of whether we should make “relevance” a compelling rationale for the research questions we choose to ask. And whose criteria for “relevance” should drive policy engagement by the Task Force? Moreover, how can it be ascertained whether members of the Task Force are in fact representing members’ interests, as the mission statement mandates? Although rigor and neutrality can and should be sought in the application of methods to answer specific policy questions, the questions that

policy researchers choose to ask are inescapably non-neutral. This roundtable illustrated the point by raising important issues about how “the public interest” is defined in policy research and policy making (Bardoel), and about how policy research agendas can be enhanced significantly through sustained relationships with advocacy organizations and policy makers (Napoli). Efforts by the Social Science Research Council were cited as exemplary.

2. *The IAMCR/UNESCO research agenda:* In December 2007, UNESCO hosted a workshop in Paris for the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) “to elaborate a policy-relevant research agenda which can serve as a framework for the elaboration of specific research projects.” The resulting agenda presents policy-relevant research questions and priorities that address key concerns of UNESCO’s Communication and Information Sector. This session focused on highlights of the report. Roundtable participant and IAMCR president Robin Mansell (and one of the principal authors of the IAMCR/UNESCO research agenda) discussed the fruitful exercise, which pointed to many possible IAMCR roles. Thomas Tufté argued that the agenda could be stronger in pointing the way towards actual citizen engagement in media and communication policy. Hopeton Dunn argued that more could be done within IAMCR to encourage sections and working groups to produce a “public output.”
3. *Policy mapping as a resource for media policy activism:* The “Global Media Policy Mapping Project,” a collective effort among several IAMCR members, aims to develop a research methodology aimed at reducing the complexities of the global media policy environment for analytical and practical purposes, while offering directions for interested actors’ understanding, deliberation and action. The project builds on previous scholarly efforts to map the field of global media policy as well as on existing resource bases and monitoring initiatives on information and communication policy processes. Yet this project goes beyond such efforts by developing a methodology to integrate a number of relevant resources into the same strategy. Roundtable participants were some of the primary actors in developing the mapping project. The discussion focused on the benefits of these efforts for media policy activists. As Marc Raboy noted, one long term challenge of the project will be to convince a broader community about the relevance of media policy research, the goal being the empowerment of a broader set of actors who do not necessarily have the competencies to engage in policy discourses. Claudia Padovani discussed details of policy mapping as a methodology for knowledge generation, and Arne Hintz highlighted the value and challenges of promoting map uses and interpretation for a wide range of stakeholders.
4. *Strategies for promoting public knowledge about media policy:* This roundtable addressed the benefits and challenges in drawing closer ties between policy researchers and the relevant publics. Returning to questions raised earlier in the day, about asking the right questions, and about criteria for identifying research priorities and important constituencies, what are the means by which the findings of policy research can best be communicated to relevant publics? Kate Coyer presented feedback that she and Becky Lentz gathered in February 2008 at SSRC, pointing to a variety of ways to broaden public access to knowledge about media policy through transnational collaboration, the development of tools for identifying knowledge needs and gaps, translating material from many countries, improving access to study findings, and developing greater awareness about and concern with avoiding a Western focus and dominance. Joe Karaganis discussed the SSRC’s program on “Necessary

Knowledge for a Democratic Public Sphere,” and the various specific activities that SSRC pursues to promote public knowledge about media policy and media reform. One aim of SSRC’s efforts, as he put it, is “to make communication research matter.”

### **Recommendations from the Stockholm pre-conference**

The topics and concerns that were raised and discussed throughout the day were many, and a summary cannot capture the full range of viewpoints and ideas that were exchanged, but it demonstrates many of the principal concerns that were shared by participants. What appears below is a list of recommendations made by participants at the pre-conference, and that are worthy of further consideration as ways to enable IAMCR to become more publicly engaged in media and communication policies and processes. The discussions and recommendations at the meeting went beyond the scope of the stated main theme, but for parsimony’s sake, the list below focuses only on recommendations that seem directly pertinent to the theme of “Promoting Public Knowledge of Media Policy Research.”

1. *Engage more directly with policy advocates:* Doing so provides a clear view of what policies and policy positions are most salient with particular segments of the active public. One way to do this is through research about policy advocates, either in-depth with a small number (including participant observation) or through surveys across a wide range of advocacy organizations. In addition to the clear value in understanding the priorities of media reform advocates, this is also a way for media policy researchers to come to a clearer understanding of the sorts of policy research needs that they themselves can satisfy. The idea of “building a culture of collaboration between media research and media reform,” which the SSRC has supported (Karaganis), is also one that many IAMCR members are able to support through research and practice. Policy advocates are a crucially important part of the public, because they often are very well-versed on policy issues, and they are in strong positions to communicate policy issues, and the findings and implications of policy research, to the broader public. The Task Force can play a variety of roles in facilitating communication between various IAMCR constituencies and policy advocates.
2. *Engage more directly with policy makers and in policy forums:* As in the case of engagement with media policy advocates, a clearer understanding of policy issues, dilemmas and priorities can be obtained through research about and interaction with policy makers. Task Force members can be instrumental in facilitating engagement between policy makers and relevant experts within the association.
3. *Support IAMCR policy research initiatives:* Activities such as the IAMCR/UNESCO collaboration on a research agenda provide an ideal opportunity for IAMCR members to become engaged in policy-relevant research, for example, the production of reports and toolkits, the assessment of indicators, comparative studies, and facilitation with other research groups and associations.
4. *Promote greater public involvement by sections and working groups:* The Task Force can develop simple mechanisms for promoting knowledge about policy developments within

various sections and working groups. For example, information about policies pertaining to public investment in HIV/AIDS communication and outreach by an international agency could be forwarded to members of the HIV/AIDS working group. Although it is the prerogative of the sections and working groups to organize themselves around their respective research priorities, the Task Force could serve as an active switchboard to channel information to particular sections and working groups about policy-relevant research opportunities and needs. In turn, more can be done by sections and working groups to effectively communicate the policy implications of their work to broader publics beyond their memberships, which can also be facilitated by the Task Force. As one participant compellingly stated, “We need to reduce the ‘silo’ tendency that isolates the sections and working groups from one another and from the association as a whole.” Overcoming this tendency could greatly improve the potential for public outreach as IAMCR members look for wider relevance for the intellectual concerns of their own sections and working groups.

5. *Develop public communication strategies for disseminating policy research:* With many experts in communication strategy among the members of IAMCR, the association can aid in the public dissemination of the results of policy-oriented research efforts. The Task Force could be instrumental in this effort, and in efforts to develop mechanisms to facilitate feedback and participation that reflects the experience of citizens who potentially or actually are affected by specific policies.
6. *Support the development of web resources for monitoring policy issues, institutions and forums:* There are many institutions that monitor media policy at both national and transnational levels, and IAMCR could have a visible and highly influential global presence merely by serving as a portal to many of those resources. With minimal effort to design, launch and maintain such a site, and with effective promotion, IAMCR could gain significant benefits through prominence as an indispensable channel for communication and media policy resources from media observatories, media watch organizations, policy think tanks, etc. Members could contribute to and benefit from these resources as well.