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Media Policy, Audiences, and Social Demand

Research at the Interface of Policy Studies and Audience Studies

Marc Raboy
Bram Dov Abramson
University of Montreal

Serge Proulx
University of Quebec at Montreal

Roxanne Welters
University of Montreal

Recent changes in the technological and economic environments have been accompanied by a series of policy developments at international and national levels. An important implication of these changes has been an impasse for policies that articulate public interest with respect to the media. This impasse, we argue, strongly indicates a need for qualitative research that can be used as a new basis for legitimacy of public policy in communications. To address this, a research agenda centered around the idea of

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"social demand" is proposed. The object of this article is to begin to elaborate the theoretical foundation for such an agenda.

To think clearly about media policy and social demand, it is first necessary to explore the tension between some of the underlying epistemological and, indeed, political concerns that currently traverse the field of communication studies. How can research contribute not only to understanding media but also to meaningful policy intervention without being confined to the realm of administrative research?[1] Such an approach implies both a critical stance and a reformist strategy. It situates media, ideally, between the market and the state, between two forms of domination and control. It then focuses on ways to orient media toward social and cultural objectives that they might otherwise be unable to meet, especially what Cave and Melody (1989) have called "nonmarket public policy objectives." This approach, to echo O'Regan's (1992, 520) well-chosen words, seeks to combine "a consultant's sense of action and intervention with a social critic's sense of the significance derived from the object's importance in society."

As various scholars have noted, academic research in communication has not had a significant impact on public policy (Mueller 1995; Noam 1993). There are obviously clear external reasons for this. But part of the reason lies in the nature of the research itself, and in the lack of articulation between research traditions. As a corrective, we argue in the first section of the article for a closer dialogue between scholars working in what ought to be seen as related areas of communication research: policy studies and audience studies. This argument will allow us to then develop our idea of social demand and, finally, to propose a research design approach that attempts to work at the interface of these convergent traditions.

Policy Studies / Audience Studies: Issues at the Interface

At the intersection of ongoing geopolitical events and developments in social and political theory (see Thompson 1995), debate about the media's role is tied in with new conceptions of citizenship and identity and a fundamental shift in notions of what is public and what is private (cf. Mouffe 1992; van Steenbergen 1994). Consider the following:

> The threshold separating the private sphere from the public is not marked by a fixed set of issues or relationships but by *different conditions of communication*. Certainly these conditions lead to differences in the accessibility of the two spheres, safeguarding the intimacy of the one sphere and the publicity of the other. However, they do not seal off the private from the public but only channel the flow of topics from the one sphere into the other. *For the public sphere draws its impulses from the private handling of social problems that resonate in life histories* [emphasis added]. (Habermas 1996, 366)

This recent statement from a social philosopher who continues to influence a major current of media scholarship and to spark controversy is itself resonant. Use of Habermas's (1989) notion of the public sphere as a theoretical framework for research, and criticism of that framework, is too often based on a text first published in 1962. Yet, Habermas's own thought has continued to evolve—although it is fair to say that his basic quest for societal rationality through communicative relations ("intersubjectivity") has remained constant. For thirty years he did not return to the subject of the public sphere at all. When he did take it up again in the early 1990s, it was with an entirely fresh approach, confounding those who would talk of discrete public and private spaces by reminding them that the public and private are in fact intertwined (Habermas 1992).

Research that uses the public sphere as a theoretical and analytical category is inevitably preoccupied with democracy (Dahlgren 1995; Price 1995). Conversely, as more and more social science researchers are recognizing, talking about democracy should necessarily mean reflecting on the relationship between public and private spheres—and the media. As Morley (1992, 1) pointed out, the media are fundamental "in articulating the public and private spheres, and in the social organization of space, time and community." Media use is never *either* public or private; it is always both. It always structures and is structured by both social and political institutions and the individuals who live them.

The equation becomes even more complex when we consider the multiple relationships of individuals to the media. Media users are variously constructed as viewers, consumers, and citizens (Corner 1991). Collectively, they are labeled *the audience*, *the market*, *the public* (Thomas 1960). Are the various speakers referring to the same thing when they use these terms or to different attributes of the same thing? Or are they referring to different things composed of the same people?

In the context of policy studies and audience studies, working through these oppositions means, first of all, thinking of the individual as traversed simultaneously by both the policy and media apparatuses. The communicative subject must be conceptualized as both media user and citizen. In this sense, agencies of the state intervene in the larger structures that organize media use, while public understanding of media use influences and structures state intervention. Therefore, at the intersection of policy studies and audience studies lie different approaches to a common problem, conceptualized as the media-audience relationship on one hand and as the media-public relationship on the other. The ground between them is both theoretical, working between two modes of analysis, and practical, testing and developing theory empirically.

Policy Studies: One Problem, Two Traditions

Communication policy studies stand at a double remove. In most countries, public policy in communication tends to be made independently of those who study it. And among academics, communication policy scholars have not engaged in extensive dialogue with the main schools to be found in departments of policy studies, public administration, or political science and their related journals. Communication policy studies, as the site at which "the academic research community can fulfil its own potential in participatory democracies" (Melody 1990, 38), are therefore confronted with isolation both from their academic counterparts and the real-world objects of their study.

Clearly, the former is of significance only inasmuch as it may affect the latter. Communication policy studies are concerned with directing academic labor toward useful intervention into the institutions and industries that articulate the field of communications and culture—what Tony Bennett referred to as "the need for intellectual work to be conducted in a manner such that, in both its substance and its style, it can be calculated to influence or service the conduct of identifiable agents within the region of culture concerned" (1992, 23; cf. inter alia Gomery 1993; McQuail 1994; Hagins 1996; McQuail and Siune 1998).

To what extent communication policy studies resemble or do not resemble mainstream policy studies, therefore—and they do not—is a question whose relevance is limited to the degree to which their isolation might hinder the real-world effectivity of communication policy studies. These tend to fall into two branches: research designed to support or evaluate particular policies and research designed to analyze or criticize. Researchers recently have sought to broaden the scope of these studies by expanding the definitional domain of the policy environment itself. For Malm and Wallis (1992, 21), for example,

> the term "media policy" comprises all kinds of action patterns and strategies used by states, corporations, institutions, formal or informal organizations, and individuals to influence developments within the media sector.

By implication, any or all of these aspects can fall within the scope of media policy studies. But inevitably, media policy research agendas are heavily influenced by external factors, such as the "crisis" of public service broadcasting or the G7 project to develop a "global information infrastructure" and the different policy environments of the countries or zones of governance in which the studies are done (cf. Raboy 1999).

Unsurprisingly, communication scholars have approached issues of policy and of the state's role as a structuring set of institutions through the

theoretical paradigms already present in the discipline. While recent policy research has focused on a range of issues from the making of political and economic arrangements through the activities of industrial lobbies and social movements, such research has tended to align itself with larger approaches in communication studies. Of these, the most visible critical approach has been political economy, which takes as axiomatic that the institutional manifestations of social and cultural life are politically and economically driven and analyzes the connections between these by identifying the points where power and influence gather and interests are articulated through conflict. To Golding and Murdock, for example, the political economy approach to communication emphasizes "the growth of the media; the extension of corporate reach; commodification; and the changing role of state and government intervention" (1991, 15). This focus on macro-actors forms the basis for a mode of policy analysis that takes industrial and institutional, legal, and economic structures as its objects of investigation.

The shortcoming of such an approach to policy, however, is that it does not necessarily allow for an adequate accounting of how the very individuals who negotiate such structures are transformed in and through media activity. This can result in a view of the communicative subject that is akin to the hypodermic needle model. To be more precise, researchers concerned about the relations among media, the economy, and politics have often presented their focus on institutions as a *methodological* choice, justified by the apparent absence of the public from policy discourses (cf. McQuail and Siune 1986). This risks missing the point that people can influence the processes by which media structures and institutions evolve in a variety of important ways.

Thus, when Gomery (1993, 191) calls for communication policy studies that "link the study of the economics of ownership and corporate behaviour to the communication qualities we desire," he omits to ask who is to ascertain these qualities, on what basis they are to be ascertained, and whether the citizens who are the targets of policy might be able to contribute to this process. Similarly, as noted by Mueller (1995, 466), "the treatment the subject receives from political economists has more to do with its status as a resource, an object of utility, value, or power, than any particular conception of what happens psychologically or culturally when people communicate." So while political economy's attention to the unequal distribution of power across social and economic structures is crucial to any policy analysis, this same stance has closed off a more subtle view of the local interactions that take place on the contradictory terrain of culture, where the effects of structures are translated into lived experience.

A second approach to studying communication policy has been proposed by scholars emerging from the cultural studies trajectory. Ironically,

while an important emphasis in cultural studies on texts and microprocesses has led to occasionally bitter polemics with political economy researchers who privilege institutional questions (cf. Gandy 1995), policy proponents within cultural studies have in fact attempted to trace a route similar to that of political economists in privileging the institutional. This has been particularly true in the recent work of Australian specialists in cultural policy such as Tony Bennett (1992, 28), who wrote that

> the programmatic, institutional and governmental conditions in which cultural practices are inscribed—in short, the networks of relations that fall under a properly theoretical understanding of policy—have a substantive priority over the semiotic properties of such practices.

But whereas political economy tends to suspend the question of the cultural dimension in policy, the cultural studies approach to policy takes culture as its starting point, defines culture as a particular field of government, and suggests that policy is constitutive of different forms of culture. This is consistent with a continuing concern in cultural studies over how subjectivity is produced. Just as audience studies served as a key site for theorizing the formation of the self through media consumption (Allor 1988), so policy studies serve as an entry point to examining how the state interpellates individuals as citizens, structuring the terrain on which the individual is formed (Miller and Rose 1992). Approaches from both cultural studies and political economy thus converge toward a concern with the complexity of the policy framework in which cultural practices evolve—what Stuart Cunningham (1992, 4) called the "cultural infrastructure," which is "the integration of policy, institutions and industrial practices as they together provide mechanisms for defining, justifying and delivering cultures to audiences."

As we have emphasized, these are not the only two approaches to communication policy studies and are certainly dwarfed by the range of approaches in the broad field of policy studies. But the common ground between the two bodes well, and explains our choice. Rather than moving away from local processes and the transformations that take place within them, however, we want to suggest that communication policy studies need to move back toward these and incorporate them into their modes of analysis. In particular, the area of audience studies—a favorite straw man for some, old baggage to be disposed of for others—has to be invited into, not excluded from, communication policy studies. The question is how to integrate what we can learn from each of these areas of scholarship into a workable model. Indeed, we would argue that policy cannot be studied without investigating how it is activated on the population; conversely,

intervention in policymaking should be connected with the ways in which citizens continue to live out the structures of government.

Audience Studies: Consumers and Citizens

Communication policy is an ambiguous creature in that it combines the logics of technological and political apparatuses—two competing logics that meet at the point of media use, cohabiting the individual who is constituted as, at once, consumer and citizen (Murdock 1992). Communication policy thus functions as an intervention into two networks of relations: media-citizenry and media-audience. The role of audience studies in such a matrix is to do the work of investigating how the structures that policy set into play are lived out not simply at the point of use or consumption but as negotiated practices embedded in larger social and civic structures.

By making audience studies part of a program for communication policy studies, in other words, the notion of an active citizenry can replace the model of media users seen as the atomized objects of, alternately, government policy and cultural industries.[2] Citizenries, like audiences, are located in partially determining structures that they negotiate and even resist: "The subjects of policy—the communities that are in some sense brought into being by a policy programme—are not exhausted by the policy programme, and may reshape policy to their own ends" (O'Regan 1992, 521). This is not the same as tracking down and then celebrating "resistance" for its own sake. Rather, it is a taking account of the practices that continually recreate the structures that individual subjects negotiate—working across "the difference between having power over a text and having power over the agenda within which that text is constructed and presented" (Morley 1992, 31). And that means the retooling of reception and audience research for their reinvigoration in policy intervention. Audience studies cannot simply be injected into policy work wholesale; the trajectory from living room couch to policy chambers requires that the question of how the relationship between audience and text is negotiated be restated in rather different terms.

Empirical ethnographic research helpfully enables the mapping of different practices onto the social structures in which the subject is materialized, among which media consumption plays an important part. In policy terms, differing interpretations can be linked with the differentiated characteristics of the population, that is, of citizens. Media users are thus taken up as individuals with complex socioeconomic positionings, rather than nothing-but-consumers who cease to exist the moment the television is turned off. Critical audience ethnography should therefore be an important part of the communication policy studies repertoire.[3]

On the other hand, media use is very much an act of consumption, engaged in precisely because it provides pleasure or enjoyment, fulfillment or distraction, as well as information and confirmation. Rather than elide the nature of media consumption by centering solely on its articulation with social structures, it is important that its place in the reproduction of the social be thought together with the transient practice of turning on or tuning in to communication technologies. The twin functions of "connection with society, and gratification of self" (Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas 1973, 173) necessarily accompany each other, and the articulation of pleasure and social positioning through media consumption is a problematic central to the interface between audience studies and policy studies. Making audience research useful for policy intervention requires outfitting it for translation into active programs of action, and this demands breathing new life into Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch's (1974, 31) advice that "media researchers ought to be studying human needs to discover how much the media do or do not contribute to their creation and satisfaction."

Let us be clear about this: to accept that the individual at the point of media use is traversed by needs and desires in no way implies that these are not the outcome of complex processes of social negotiation, already structured by social and class positions—just as looking back to uses and gratifications research in no way means adopting the model of the audience as an atomized mass of individuals (cf. Morley 1992, 52-55). Rather, it is part of developing an approach to communication policy studies that is able to use earlier scholarship by reworking it in light of contemporary critiques (cf. Jensen and Rosengren 1990).[4]

Reception and audience research can then play a key role in studying communication policy. They work across the endlessly cycling circuit between institutional structures and local negotiations, bringing together different research traditions to articulate social positioning and individual practices at the point of consumption. The social relationships between audience and text must be examined but also conceptualized in terms of how policy seeks to influence those relationships and how policy studies might understand and intervene in that influence.

Communication policy studies are thus confronted with two sets of questions. The first of these takes as its starting point the kind of mapping of the structures of domination at which political economists and other policy analysts have proven so adept: how can we understand how these institutional and industrial structures are lived out? How is policy activated on and within the population? What are the precise connections between the structures that interpellate individual users as subjects and the subjectivities that are reproduced inside and out of these interpellations? Here, structural concerns flow downstream into the difficult empirical and qualitative research of audience studies. The second set of questions, meanwhile,

focuses on moving back upstream: how can the understanding of the effects of structural determinations contribute to adjustments of those structures? How can the patterns of individual and collective media use inform the organization of the field of culture as articulated through the state and other institutional actors who are at least partly under the state's domain? And what policies can be mobilized to influence the field's reorganization?

Thus, when Sonia Livingstone (1996, 51) located the crucial question at the interface of policy and audience studies as "What are the implications for the construction of the public/audience by the media industries and to what extent are they right or wrong?" she is only partly correct. The question is not simply to what extent media industries and institutions' constructions of the public are right or wrong, but more importantly, how they *become* right or wrong through the process of actively constructing subject positions for the user to take up, resist, or otherwise negotiate. That is the crucial distinction for a policy intervention model that would operate "through a process of consultation and evaluation involving those affected by [policy prescriptions]" (Miller 1996, 146). Such a model would take as axiomatic the constantly changing nature of both structural conditions and social affiliations and engage in a back-and-forth between policy prescriptions and the terrain on which such policies, and the institutional conditions they regulate, are lived out.

It will have become obvious that while the points of entry for such analysis are infinitely varied—local conditions, an institutional intervention, modulations in state regulatory regimes, and so forth—the first step is always a mapping of the landscape. Researchers have put great effort into developing better theoretical and empirical understandings of how audiences are "really" positioned by texts or by policies and not enough effort into understanding how cultural and government institutions develop texts and policies to position audiences and citizens (cf. Hartley 1988; Malo and Giroux 1998). A gap exists between research models for understanding communication and audience processes and the models informing industrial and institutional practices of communication (Ang 1991). Asserting the superiority of the former over the latter is insufficient, for it leaves the real-world effects of the latter's deployment unexplored.

In the current context, as Entman and Wildman (1992) have noted, new metaphors are needed to guide this type of research agenda.[5] Communication policy studies cannot focus simply on the relationship between state and citizens in the regulation of communication systems. They must position that relationship within the cluttered space of all of the industrial and institutional structures that make up those systems—and, indeed, confronted with an increasingly dispersed "network state," it may no longer make much sense to think in such terms anyway (Braman 1995). Bringing together different research traditions in confronting communication policy

is only a first step. One must then wield these in fashioning the tools of the trade.

Regarding Social Demand

Media use is at once highly individual and part of the social positioning of the individual. It is polymorphic: a combination of taste and temperament, family situation, political interest, and economic imperative. By situating media consumption within the constellation of activities through which the individual occupies a sociopolitical role, an appreciation of the individual's social complexity can correct the danger of reducing audience members to an undifferentiated group. As Proulx et al. (1993, 117-18) concluded from a study of television use among Montreal families,

> The category of user obscures the other social identities of the individual; for example, his membership in a family, in various networks at work and at play, in a socio-professional or ethnocultural group, and so on. It would no doubt be preferable to orient our research problem on the basis of a definition of the individual as parent, citizen, worker, etc; this would allow for considering the individual at the level of his or her actual social practice. [Our translation]

In considering the range of practices that locate the individual within social structures, social demand orbits around the field of citizenship as a space for intervention. Such a position depends on conceptualizing citizenship as the juncture between individual subjects and a democratic state, such that public policy is directed at ensuring a measure of control for the subject over the actualization of her or his own identity. Especially in rapidly evolving policy contexts, citizenship is the site at which the state directs the policy interventions that entail "invent[ing] new mechanisms for the empowerment of social actors—who, for better or for worse, are still politically constituted primarily within national boundaries" (Raboy et al. 1994, 296-7).

Now, citizenship is a contested concept. Charles Taylor (1989, 178-9), for example, has described two models of citizenship, the "liberal" and the "communitarian": "One [model] focuses mainly on individual rights and equal treatment, as well as a government performance which takes account of the citizen's preferences. . . . The other model, by contrast, defines participation in self-rule as of the essence of freedom." We take a less categorical view of citizenship, as that which encompasses the individual's relationship to the state while intersecting with her or his self-image as an active member of society—"a specific form of identity," to use Dahlgren's phrase (1995, 146).

Market Demand

The notion of citizenship underscores both the legitimacy and the validity of state intervention: is it appropriate, and can it be significant? To begin to answer this question, we need to understand much more than we do at present about the nature of media use. To begin looking for that understanding, we need to reformulate the object of our search.

The democratic state has historically justified its intervention with respect to media in terms of their social and economic role. Public policy in this area has been implemented despite the counterargument that only in an unfettered market environment can media be free of all obstacles and guarantee absolute freedom of expression. With the transformation in the role of media concurrent with the globalization of communications, these institutions are increasingly central to cultural development and the active participation of citizens in public life. Moreover, a vast literature attests to the weakness of the idealist model of "free" media in an environment characterized for over a century by growing commercialization and insertion of the media into the framework of cultural industries (see, e.g., Nerone 1995).

These observations alone should suffice to justify the continuing effort to intervene in the evolution of media systems. But the combination of a severe fiscal crisis and changes in the nature of state power at the national level has brought about a general skepticism with respect to interventionist strategies. Until recently, for example, a key element of public policy in most of the industrialized countries was the support of public service broadcasting, supposedly insulated, in principle at least, from economic and political pressures. Public broadcasting was conceived as an alternative to market broadcasting, using public support but free of state control. Today, however, the need to renew the conventional public broadcasting model tends to be framed around market, rather than public, alternatives (Atkinson and Raboy 1997).

If it is not to lose its raison d'être, then, public policy in communication must seek a new basis for legitimation. Market logic rests on the conceptualization of media users as fully formed consumers whose social constitution is radically disconnected from their private selves. Market logic therefore emphasizes competition and the multiplication of choice as the path to fulfilling the needs of the consumer. This inscribes a radical disjuncture between private and public spheres, reproduced through industrial tools that measure private consumption habits such as television audience size at the point of viewing.

This logic of market demand clouds the possibility that the media user may have other media needs that the market does not, or cannot, address. In response, public policy aims, through formal policy texts, to articulate

objectives with respect to media according to the national and other interests that traverse the network of state apparatuses (which vary significantly from one context to another depending on local circumstances). And to the extent that these interests coincide with democratic governance, communication policy attempts to serve as a corrective to the a priori split of public and private that drives most media programming, by reintroducing the public categories of citizenship into the sphere of private media practices.

Social Demand

An important problem for the legitimacy of legislative and regulatory practices, however, is the difficulty in determining the ways in which media do or do not conform to the nonmarket objectives of policy. Legislators and policymakers continue to articulate policy objectives in terms that extend beyond the market. Yet, the bureaucratic need for quantifiable— and thus legitimized—information means that decision makers are forced to return to market demand, which is more easily measurable when it comes time to evaluate policy's effectivity in meeting desired goals. Like the industrial logic for which it is a tool, the audience maximization model of market demand rests entirely on private consumption habits, that is, on a division of public and private realms. The logic of market demand positions this distinction as preceding the social activity of media use, rather than produced through it, and implies a sovereign self who comes to the media with fully formed identities, needs, interests, circumstances, and aspirations. Faced with a lack of other modes of evaluation, policy makers thus end up deploying the very market model of the media user that many stated policies purport to correct.

To suggest, on the other hand, that media use is a distinctly social activity and part of the ongoing production of self and society, is to suggest an alternative logic that rejects the public/private split as its starting point—and to highlight the need for a conceptual and evaluative tool produced within this alternative logic. Against market demand, therefore, we want to position what we call a model of "social demand," which refuses an a priori division and recognizes the articulations between public and private in the various facets of every individual's life. Where market demand positions users as private creatures, social demand understands individuals, and the public-private structures that they inhabit, as socially constituted. This does not mean that corporate strategies that encourage consumption are based on unsophisticated research or on a poor understanding of potential customers' social identities, only that, under strategies driven by market demand, the act of consumption *itself* is constituted as the process's endpoint. Nor does this mean that demand can be reduced to some expression of society's needs—this would be another reification based on a faulty

division of public and private—only that it is necessary to take account of the larger networks of power in society and the asymmetrical distribution of individuals along these networks.

Talking about social demand thus underscores the range of expectations with respect to media that are expressed independently of economic and political considerations. Expressions of social demand are situated at the interface of media use and the supply, or offer, on which media use is based. Media audiences, in this view, are composed of socially constituted citizens with multifaceted identities for whom media consumption is an activity among others—not simply as, say, viewers who come into existence (and thus under the jurisdiction of broadcasting legislation) when they turn on the television and who cease to exist when they turn it off. The media public thus exists in society, aggregated differently than when the same individuals occupy the position of audience members. As citizens, individuals can have a critical relationship with media that is far more subtle and difficult to grasp than the catalog of their use habits would seem to indicate.

If we take up citizenship and not simply consumership as the focus of policy intervention, therefore, it is less the function of some essential value in citizenship than the result of the differing forces at work within the two categories. Although consumption emphasizes the relationship between the individual subject and the commercial market, citizenship emphasizes the individual subject's position with respect to the state. The state, meanwhile, generally conceptualizes both the citizen and the corporation as subjects (of the state) and its own role as one of applying constraints or incentives in the national interest. The idea of social demand seeks to refocus each of these roles on society, as the expression of the full range of individual, group, and general interests. The figure of citizenship is thus recentered as the main mediating category between the state and the self. Within such a theoretical framework, the idea of social demand is at the heart of a public policy approach to media that is based on a set of evolving epistemological and political tools that link investigation with intervention.

Logically, public policy should provide the normative framework for legislation and regulation that seek to fulfil social demand. To achieve this, it is necessary to position media users as social actors rather than simply as consumers, as citizens as well as members of particular identity groups. The elaboration of social demand thus encompasses a strong normative aspect by intersecting with public policy, which is normative by definition. Or to put it another way, for public policy to be legitimate, it must take account of social demand. Research design, with respect to social demand, is therefore highly contextual. It makes more sense, in fact, to try to study *the ways in which social demand is expressed*, than to pretend to describe it as a material object. One can do this by bringing together sociocritical discourse

analysis of policy texts and documents intended to influence policy, and qualitative individual and group interviewing that seeks to bring out self-descriptions of the finalities of media use. By bringing the active citizenry into its research design, policy-oriented critical research might be able to help formulate a closer approximation of appropriate public-policy objectives.

Translating Demand into Policy

For researchers interested in policy intervention, the idea of social demand provides a way to articulate a public interest with respect to media. Epistemologically, its role is to provide a way to think through and to understand media use across a range of social categories that position the user. Politically, this task is intended to connect up with already-existing public policy that assigns specific social obligations to particular mass media operations. Article 3 of Canada's Broadcasting Act (*Statutes* 1991), which is the centerpiece of Canadian media policy, provides an interesting example of what we are talking about. It states,

> The Canadian broadcasting system should . . . through its programming and the employment opportunities arising out of its operations, serve the needs and interests, and reflect the circumstances and aspirations, of Canadian men, women and children, including equal rights, the linguistic duality and multicultural and multiracial nature of Canadian society and the special place of aboriginal peoples within that society. (*Statutes* 1991, clause 3.1.d.iii)[6]

This formulation offers an interesting point of departure for our attempt to concretize social demand at conceptual and evaluative levels, in that it provides specific social categories—however imperfect—with which to decompose the interface of citizen and consumer. In our own research (Proulx and Raboy forthcoming), those confronted with this text were, before all else, amazed to learn that the political-legal framework of their country provided them with such rights with respect to the media system at all. Depending on how they see themselves, they may agree or disagree with part or all of the legislator's way of breaking down Canadian society into so many serviceable categories. Yet, they do express a range of expectations based on their real or desired media use, reflecting a particular view of the world and their own place in it.

How can this be translated into policy? Should it? Can it? The act does not enable one to determine with any precision what would be an adequate response to needs and interests, or an appropriate reflection of circumstances and aspirations—let alone how to speak to someone whose identity is not confined to the categories it mentions. It is precisely here that expres-

sions of social demand can intervene, by working among policy objectives, the range of possibilities open to policy makers, and the subjects of policy—that is, the citizenry. But the individuals who compose a given society vary enormously in how they exercise their citizenship. For some, it is a strictly personal expression of social concerns. Others seek to associate with their fellows in efforts to influence the course of events. For some, the material and emotional needs of daily life supersede all interest in social intervention. Others will integrate a measure of social intervention in their professional lives. Regardless, everyone has the right to expect that the media system will respond to their needs and interests, reflect their circumstances and aspirations.

How, then, can one grasp, describe, measure, or qualify expressions of social demand, which can indicate whether such objectives are being met? This is a task infinitely messier and more difficult than attempting to quantify market demand, and beginning to answer this question would require an elaborate research program. We can, for example, illustrate the nature of social demand by investigating media use. Similarly, we can explore which media people would desire if they could restructure supply according to their needs and interests, circumstances and aspirations. We can also evaluate public policy issues from a social demand perspective. We can verify the concordance between formal policy objectives and the lived experience of people targeted by policy. Obviously, just like media use itself, social demand is highly subjective and differentiated from one person to the next. One must avoid the pitfall of assuming that social demand can be described through the accumulation of individual expectations. The demand expressed through organized groups therefore remains an essential part of the policy formation process.

In collective terms, social demand is expressed through the public interventions of pressure groups, experts, editorialists, and so forth; it should normally be reflected in public policy. But in certain respects, organized public expression of social demand is a mirror image of market-driven audience measurement and raises similar questions of interest and representativeness. To be fully operational as a policy instrument, then, social demand must be shown to reflect both public and private expressions of media use. Alongside this organized expression of demand, policy must engage with the individual as an active citizen, living as a member of civil society in a complex relationship with the market, the state, and other structuring institutions.

How to approach this? First, research needs to reconceptualize the audience member as more than a media user, to give voice to the citizen within her or him, in whichever way he or she chooses to express that voice. This means more than the archetypal ethnographer's respect for the research subject. It means seeing audience members not for their relationship to the

"average," not as simple mimetic representations of larger populations, but as complex members of society. Along with Brunt (1992, 74), we would emphasize the "typical" in this respect:

> Whether it is researching with groups or with individuals . . . "the typical" engages with often heightened circumstances, special conditions, exceptional cases, extreme positions, precisely in order to highlight tendencies that may in "normal circumstances" be merely incipient.

Research that takes social demand as an evaluative tool must therefore be grounded in an understanding of the architecture of civil society, in the specific circumstances in which the research is being undertaken. Such understanding must be translated into a process of data gathering and analysis that combines consideration of actual policy texts with relevant collective expressions, submissions, and commentaries regarding the issues addressed in those texts. This contextual articulation of policy data would inform the understanding of media use that can be gained through a program of discussions and interviews with individuals that seek to sound out and draw in some of civil society's constituent elements.

The program for researching social demand that we have outlined here is only a first step, particularly given its necessarily incomplete nature outside of specific political and social contexts. Its purpose is to generate useful research for policy makers mandated to act and to intervene in the public interest by indicating an alternative to the market demand model for defining what that interest might be. As such, it can play an agenda-setting function by highlighting understudied, unaccounted-for, or unmet aspects of the public interest and necessitating, at least, larger-scale research or public debate, and at most, changes to the laws and regulations that intervene in the media environment.

Recent work in communication and cultural policy studies suggests concern for not only a specific set of research questions but also a way of making the answers to those questions useful. An important consideration here is that useful answers cannot be found by analyzing the policy text alone, nor even by detailed study of the process by which a piece of policy is adopted and implemented. Only by confronting the imputed intentions of policy with the lived experience of the people within its purview can we begin to make such research meaningful.

Meanwhile—globalization notwithstanding—legislation and regulation continue to affect and influence media structures, institutions, practices, and programs. Policy, consequently, still influences to a significant extent the supply side of the citizen/consumer equation. As citizens and consumers, media users negotiate the articulations of their public and private

wants and desires in an imperfect media environment. Researchers must recognize that it is not fruitful to study either policy or media use without taking both into account—that is the implication of a research agenda aimed at developing theoretical and empirical instruments for policy intervention. The approach described here is proposed as an alternative response to existing industry-driven policy research tools, in which market demand continues to play the dominant role. Much work remains to be done on developing an alternative model for media policy development based on notions such as social demand. However, if research is to be renewed and reoriented toward critical intervention in the fields of communication and culture, this, we feel, is the way to go.

Notes

1. In asking this question, we are assuming that at least some of the parties to current academic debates share a general perspective on the role of media in society. This may, of course, be assuming far too much. But it is our own position that media do have a social role to play, and our own work is driven by a motivation to contribute to its realization.

2. This is to be distinguished from the notion of an "active audience," which, as a number of critics have underlined, is often falsely claimed to stand for the liberation of the individual through the act of consumption. Divorced from a consideration of the larger structures of power in which media production and reception are situated, the notion of the active audience becomes depoliticized, misleading, or simply banal (cf., inter alia, Morris 1988; and Cobley 1994). At the same time, however, the activity of audience members can be seen as an expression of citizenship.

3. Here, we bear in mind the contested nature of the term "ethnography" itself (Hammersley, 1992), as well as Lull's (1996) important caveat regarding the potential pitfalls of "determined ethnographies" and Livingstone's (1996) well-placed skepticism toward the "fad" of including an audience dimension in research designs of researchers who have little experience with audience research.

4. Compare with, for example, McRobbie's (1996) suggestion that, after the critiques of empiricism, ethnography, and the category of experience, researchers rehabilitate these practices critically rather than abandon them.

5. Thompson (1990, 249), for example, wrote that only by developing "regulated pluralism" can media institutions today "occupy a space between the unbridled operation of market forces, on the one hand, and direct control by the state, on the other."

6. This type of national media policy provision can be related to the increasing presence in international agreements of guarantees around the issue of cultural rights (cf. Niec 1998; and Venturelli 1998). These constitute an important part of the new environment for media governance, and to the extent that mobilization around them can be an effective strategy for intervening in locally relevant policy making, it

is going to become increasingly important to deploy them in the type of policy analysis that we are proposing. The authors thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

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Marc Raboy is a professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Montreal.

Bram Dov Abramson is Senior Research Analyst with TeleGeography, Inc. He was a graduate student in the Department of Communication at the University of Montreal when this article was written.

Serge Proulx is a professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Quebec at Montreal.

Roxanne Welters is a graduate student in the Department of Communication at the University of Montreal.