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M. Raboy, S. Proulx et P. Dahlgren (2003)

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(Introduction to *Gazette* issue on *Media Policy and Social Demand: A Transnational Perspective*)

## **The Dilemma of Social Demand: Shaping Media Policy in New Civic Contexts<sup>1</sup>**

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The new media environment is seamless, global, and apparently boundless in possibilities. However, notwithstanding popular misconceptions and dominant discourses about the end of regulation, activity within this environment is still based on rules and likely to remain so. The rules are changing of course, but more significantly, the way the rules are made is changing. New global institutions like the WTO are the site of monumental battles between stakeholders. National governments are looking for new ways to continue tweaking the influence of the media on their territories. Corporate strategies are redefining the shape and substance of media institutions. Users, the networks they create and the choices they make, constitute a perpetual wild card that makes it impossible to predict how the media are likely to evolve.

What does all this frenetic activity mean for media governance? Through close examination of recent events and placing these in historical perspective, we can imagine a number of possible models. Unquestionably, a global framework for media policy is emerging. Its contours are not yet clear. But the stakes are so great that any social actor who ignores this does so at its peril.

Corporate players have long recognized this and have organized themselves in various ways to influence media policy in their interests. The situation is far more complicated for actors associated with social movements, cultural communities and the ordinary exercise of citizenship.

In order to try to think through this problem with respect to both academic understanding and support for an activist agenda, we began some time ago to develop the concept of “social demand”. We use the term social demand to refer to the range of expectations with respect to media that is expressed independently of economic (market) or political (state) considerations – that is to say, expectations as they can be extrapolated from what people say about their media use, as well as the efforts of organized social and cultural groups to influence the direction of media policy.

The theoretical and epistemological basis for this idea has been developed in two published papers, first in the *International Journal of Cultural Policy* (Raboy & Abramson, 1998) and then in *Television and New Media* (Raboy, Abramson, Proulx & Welters, 2001). Now, in this special theme issue of *Gazette*, we present some of the empirical findings of researchers associated with this project.

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Basically, the notion of media policy and social demand can be summarized as follows:

The role of communication and cultural policy in framing citizenship lies at the heart of a broad and generous conception of public life. Lying at the juncture between symbolic representations and social practices, communication media occupy pride of place as institutions deemed to be crucial for the development of culture, society, citizenship and democracy. By intervening in the way media are organized, communication and cultural policy influences the existing alignments of citizenship and democracy. Historically, the state has justified its attempts to influence the media by arguing that doing so is in the public interest. Increasingly, however, public policy intervention requires a stronger base of legitimation. Within the institutional order of the state, general reliance on a policy rhetoric of "public interest" is insufficient for policymakers who seek empirical data with which to justify their action. Because the bulk of such data is currently produced as industrial audience research measuring a "market demand", policy legitimation is skewed towards measures which conceptualize public interest as "what the public is interested in", that is, what people are prepared to consume. An alternative form of audience research, based on a more sociocritical approach, would allow for the legitimation of types of cultural policy which incorporate a fuller conceptualization of the public interest and its ties to the exercise of citizenship. We call this alternative basis for policy legitimation "social demand", and argue that a clear understanding of social demand can allow media policymaking to be linked to a democratic cultural citizenship, in light of a whole range of emerging issues which policymakers as well as scholars have to consider in the double-edged context of technological convergence and media globalization.

We recognize the need to further develop this central organizing concept. It is particularly important to connect the debates surrounding media to wider discussions about the changing nature of citizenship, democracy, identity, and civic culture. It is also necessary to resolve whether "social demand", as we have defined it, is indeed an empirically verifiable notion or strictly a normative concept. 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 (ie, social demand is a "perspective", not a "thing"). We will also have to confront the fact that such a concept can be, and is, defined differently by policy makers, corporate players and users. We leave these obviously crucial questions in abeyance for the moment, in the hope that they will be clarified in the course of our research process.

A better understanding of how social demand is expressed would help inform a range of media policy issues. Methodologically, acquiring such understanding implies combining policy discourse analysis (how is social demand expressed by various actors with respect to a particular component of media policy?) with audience/user inquiry (how do people talk about their expectations on the basis of their own media practices and experience?). The project therefore focuses both on understanding individual practices, as well as on the social structures that are cross-cut by these practices. We are seeking to go

beyond describing how media institutions and the state - through policy - position individual media users, to incorporate an understanding of how individuals negotiate their own positioning. Our premise is that it is particularly essential to confront the imputed intentions of policy with lived experience in light of new user practices.

In designing this project, we also had to take some important epistemological considerations into account. One of our key concerns has been to bridge the divide between policy, or political economy, studies and audience, or media use, studies. A recurring concern among critical communication scholars has been how to develop research with a view towards policy intervention. Such concern deserves to be foregrounded in the recent academic debates between political economy and cultural studies. In order to do this - assuming that scholarly practitioners on both sides of the academic divide want to influence policy - political economy and cultural studies need to come closer together and borrow from one another. To illustrate this premise, we argue that communication policy positions the individual simultaneously as citizen and media user; in order to be relevant to policy therefore, research must address both the broader structures that constitute the media environment and the multiple ways that individuals negotiate those structures. From a policymaker's perspective, industry audience research is useful because it provides a basis for legitimating policy decisions. The problem with this is that policy then tends to be overdetermined by market considerations. The challenge to critical academic researchers, given this constraint, is to generate understanding of the social considerations that need to be taken into account by policy makers. Articulating audience studies with policy studies is central to finding ways to empirically uncover, describe and even measure what we are calling social demand in the media sphere.

This project began as a pilot study (funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) in which Marc Raboy proposed to investigate the interface between certain normative aspects of the Canadian Broadcasting Act and the actual practices of a sample of media users identified as “active citizens”. Raboy set out to investigate the “fit” between a particular aspect of media policy and the experience of a particular public with respect to the stated, or inferred, objectives of that policy. Raboy had previously done a great deal of work documenting the development of Canada's 1991 Broadcasting Act, and particularly the introduction of what he has referred to elsewhere as its “citizenship clause”, a paragraph which states that the Canadian broadcasting system should

"(...) 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 groups within that society...." (Canada 1991: 3.d.iii.)

The process leading up to adoption of the Act had begun with an open-ended task force set up in the mid-1980s to recommend a general framework and specific elements. Over a five-year period, the Act's development under the stewardship of various groups was marked by public involvement, often through the intermediary of already-organized constituencies.

The Act's language therefore reflected this public debate, providing tangible evidence of how active non-state, non-market intervention can translate into state broadcast policy. Raboy documented and analyzed the process through which various constituency groups had chosen to target the policy process as a way of intervening in the broadcasting environment. The next question was, So what? The groups' efforts had been successful in impacting formal policy texts up to a point. But had they managed to impact the broadcasting environment as a result?

Addressing that question involved looking at what people do with broadcast media. Ethnographic and audience studies are some of the ways in which media studies go about seeking answers. The social demand project was thus conceived as a project at the interface of media policy and media use studies. A timely coincidence – Serge Proulx had just concluded a major study of media use in Quebec families - allowed Raboy and Proulx to form an initial research unit and proceed with the study reported on in this issue.

Raboy and Proulx decided to work with a sample of so-called “active citizens”, selected not because they were representative of the community at large, but because they might have something to say about media and social demand. The fifteen were interviewed individually, and then invited to participate in one of two focus groups assembled for the project. While fifteen people may not seem like a lot, this research yielded a huge quantity of data.

The research demonstrated that, in general, the goals and objectives of media policy often fit poorly with the practices that policy is intended to influence, illustrating the need to develop a more sophisticated fit between media policy and media use. As reception studies have repeatedly shown, the individuals who constitute "the audience" use messages in ways that elude the intentions of content producers. The same can be said for "the public" and the spin it puts on intended policy objectives. In the current context of media globalization, diminished capacity of national governments to influence media through policy, and expansion and convergence of new communication technologies, we felt that it was pertinent to extend this research internationally as societies with different media and media policy traditions increasingly face similar problems and seek to deal with them in a range of different ways. With the generous support of the Hoso-Bunka Foundation (Tokyo) we have been able to do this.

We have deliberately framed this phase of the project as “transnational”, rather than “international” or “intercultural”. We are not proposing a comparative approach, but rather to look for significant trends, similarities and differences across a range of physical locations, selected in an attempt to combine a number of different key cultural and sociopolitical contexts as well as historical approaches to media intervention. This choice recognizes, as well, that in the current global media environment the nation-state remains the main site where concerted efforts are made to influence media systems through public policy.

This project is distinct from other studies with similar concerns in that it positions the media user as citizen, both in selecting the subject samples and in the framing of the questions we seek to answer. Some might object to the “scientific validity” of this methodological choice, and we recognize the need to make a special effort to respond to this challenge. The strongest justification for our approach, we feel, is the need to begin to address what actually happens on the field of social engagement, where empirical evidence may actually exist as to the extent to which media are succeeding or failing to achieve the idealistic goals set for them in formal policy texts.

To the extent possible, we propose a number of common research design elements for the different studies: the central methodological category is a limited number of semi-structured in-depth interviews and/or focus groups with a selected sample population of (about fifteen) media users, approached as both ordinary individuals and members of a specific social group. The field work in each case is supplemented by sociocritical analysis, using available documentary sources, of the development of a specific aspect of national media policy (including, where pertinent, analysis of the role of various social actors in the development of the policy concerned). By focusing on this range of experience, the project hopes to gain some insight into the changing historical nature and normative function of media policy formation.

Our project shows how real experience rarely fits neatly with stated policy goals. This is a huge burden to assume for policymakers and especially leaders of public institutions like public broadcasters. It is also enormous for anyone wishing to promote a normative view of media. Commercial organizations have a much easier task: their success is directly measurable in terms of the criteria that define it. The criteria that measure noncommercial, or non-market objectives, are not measurable in quantifiable terms. Their degree of success can only be extrapolated from the practices of the publics and citizens concerned.

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The preceding perspective as well as the articles that make up this theme issue of *Gazette* have evolved over a period of several years, through a series of workshops and meetings at various venues including: the International Association of Media and Communication Research congresses in Glasgow (1998) and Barcelona (2002), the British Film Institute’s Inaugural Media Conference in London (2001) and *ad hoc* seminars organized at the University of Montreal (2000) and the Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, Paris (2001). The support of the Hoso-Bunka Foundation was critical to the organization of these events. Each of the following articles stands alone, however.

In “Viewers on Television...”, Serge Proulx and Marc Raboy present the responses of social activists in Quebec to the policy objectives ascribed for Canadian broadcasting by the Canadian Broadcasting Act. Somewhat surprisingly, it turns out that for these active citizens the cultural practice of media use is fraught with ambiguity, situated in a landscape where “the user’s desires and expectations are jumbled with his or her own cultural constitution, marked by a series of social and identity reference points

whose internal consistency is anything but smooth.” In this assessment, there remains a vast space to be explored “between policy and uses”.

The study by Tobias Olsson, Håkan Sandström and Peter Dahlgren examines a rather different type of context, the adoption of new computerized communication technologies by a cohort of trade union members in Sweden. In “An Information Society for Everyone?” one can begin to appreciate the problems associated with attempts to translate the utopian promise of “the information society” into everyday reality. Their investigation uncovers a number of obstacles that stand in the way of realizing the vision of information and communications technologies as a civic tool - including economic structures, workplace disparities, language competence, and technical difficulties.

Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins explore the notion of “The Enlargement of Meaning” in a context in which their work is well-known: the communities of Turkish-speaking citizens in the United Kingdom. Revisiting the ways in which a plethora of media are received by these communities, they conclude that transnational broadcasting constitutes a kind of “policy blindspot”: “Media policy has been a resolutely national affair. And to such an extent has this been the case... the question of transnational audiences and viewing cannot be meaningfully taken on board as an issue.”

In a thoroughly different context – and yet in a similar vein – Tatsuro Hanada’s study of the Korean minority in Japan’s reading of Japanese national broadcasting illuminates the nature of “Cultural Diversity as Social Demand.” In Japan as well, media policy has been “resolutely national”, and the extent of this is most apparent when experienced from the margins. This characteristic of media policy, in fact, runs through each of the articles in this series as a kind of leitmotif.

Finally, the “fit” between media policy and social demand in a society grappling with the challenges of multiculturalism is examined by Leen d’Haenens in “ICT in Multicultural Society”. Post-colonial Dutch media policy mirrors the relationship between different aspects of “identity” and patterns of media use and consumption among minority youth of various ethno-cultural backgrounds. Access to new media technologies and their availability is critical, this research shows.

The project on media policy and social demand also includes two other participants, who are unfortunately unable to report in this issue. Thierry Vedel, of the Centre d’étude de la vie politique française (CEVIPOF) in Paris has been studying political activism with respect to Internet policy development in France. And Ahsraf Patel, of the Open Society Institute (Johannesburg) is mapping the impact of public, private and community broadcasting perspectives on to the institutional development of post-apartheid media in South Africa. We hope that there will be opportunities to publish the results of each of these studies in the near future.

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