A threshold issue for many people interested in understanding the state of play in contemporary media is sheer complexity. It is a cliché – but true nonetheless – that media are dramatically and rapidly transforming, especially with the “digital disruptions” widely discussed and featuring prominently in recent issues of Rhodes Journalism Review. There are different social, political, and economic dynamics woven into new technologies and digital cultures that require deciphering and response – as much as they offer new opportunities.

A central development heightened with the advent of digital technologies revolves around the new kind of global settings and frameworks. Such new forms of governance have a heightened influence on new and old media forms, industries, professions, and policy. However, we lack a good understanding of how policy, in particular, works in the altered new worlds of media.

For sure, there has been substantial research on the role of overarching supra-national forums, such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) or World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO), and how these now jostle with the likes of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), World Broadcasting Union (WBU), or the internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and other international bodies that deal with specific aspects of media. However, the new forces yet to receive proper reckoning are the new titans of digital media: the likes of Vodafone, Google, Baidu, Apple, Facebook, Twitter, Alibaba, and others. Add to which, global media policy has seen the emergence of new policy and governance arrangements: from company policy on how they moderate and regulate
visual mapping can help trace the development of policy debates and arrangements, explore the interconnectedness of themes that compose policy discourses, and investigate networks of interaction among people, organisations and controversial issues.

their social media platforms (dealing with the public’s online commenting), through industry self- and co-regulation, to multis­tak­eholder governance of the internet world.

Just to rachet up the challenges, how such global media dynamics play out very much depend on regional dynamics. So older theories of how cultural and media imperialism work, based on power, influence, and information radiating outwards from the former colonial and imperial metropoles have been considerably revised – to cope with the emergence of new groupings, such as new powers (for instance, those like BRICS) or ascendant regions – from Africa, to Asia, to Latin America. Into the bargain, it turns out that national, and local, media habits, preferences, practices, cultures – but especially industries, laws, and policies – often still are decisive. Amid this babel of global media, it is no surprise that ‘mapping’ is turning out to be one of the most fertile and interesting ways to come to grips with the unfolding scene of policy.

This is especially evident in the area of internet governance – one of the most contentious media issues today. Strong interest in mapping internet governance has been shown, especially by those associated with the NETMundial Initiative. Within the context of the initiative, the GovLab group at New York University – in conjunction with key internet policy body ICANN (internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) – have produced a handy “map of internet governance maps” <http://thegovlab.org/toward-a-netmundial-solutions-map-mapping-internet-governance-maps/>. Here mapping spans to include efforts such as clearing houses and observatories, as well as a number of initiatives explicitly revolving around mapping.

A relatively early mover in the world of mapping projects using online platforms and tools is the International Association of Media and Communications Research (IAMCR)’s Global Media Policy (GMP) Working Group. With heightened scholarly, policy, and civil society interest global media policy – especially evident in the strong interest in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) – the group established the Mapping Global Media Policy project in 2007 based at Media @McGill, and led by Marc Raboy (McGill University), and Claudia Padovani (Padua). The project serves to monitor, categorise and analyse key issues, significant developments and recent trends in the governance of media, information and communication on a global level.

Through a database platform, GMP <http://www.globalmediapolicy.net/> aims to build and share knowledge on the complex field of global media policy, especially relating to actors and processes. The project also aims to enhance actors’ capacity to effectively intervene in relevant policy settings and thus reduce barriers to meaningful participation, as well as stimulate collaboration between scholars and stakeholders worldwide <http://www.globalmediapolicy.net/node/20>. The GMP platform is open to researchers to establish sections on areas of their own interest. To date, there are resources on a range of topics, including gender and media, internet governance and policy, mobile internet policy, public service broadcasting, media literacy and education. The newest section is on disability and media policy, drawing on my own work.

As well as documenting and making resources available, the platform makes in-built tools available for visualization and analysis <http://www.globalmediapolicy.net/node/26>. So, for instance, the GMP platform allows the immediate transformation of the explored datasets on areas
of policy into visual representations. Investigating
global media policy through visual mapping can
help trace the development of policy debates and
arrangements, explore the interconnectedness
of themes that compose policy discourses, and
investigate networks of interaction among people,
organisations and controversial issues. Of course,
theories, approaches and methods of how to
design and deploy such digital tools are now widely
discussed with the rise of digital humanities and
social sciences, and associated ‘e-research’. Such
lively debates add further insights and provocations
to the long-standing acknowledgement of mapping
as a fraught as well as fertile endeavour, very much
involving powerful ambitions as much as imaginative
attempts to find new knowledge.

So, at the annual conference of the IAMCR held
in Montréal in July 2015, this mapping turn in media
research was put under the microscope. Organised
by the GMP Working Group, a dedicated session
on “Mapping as Relevant Knowledge” discussed the
various projects around the world attempting to
map aspects of media. Participants included Arne
Hintz (Cardiff University), Samantha Grassle (Govlab,
New York University), Annabelle Sreberny (SOAS,
University of London), Francesca Musiani (French
National Centre for Scientific Research), Marjan
de Bruin (University of West Indies), and Robin
Mansell (London School of Economics). Discussion
centred on two main themes: how relevant is all
this mapping to policy and advocacy engagement?
To what extent, and in what conditions, do these
initiatives actually contribute to more participatory
practices, better informed policy decisions, and
better media (typically the common goals of different
mapping initiatives)? And what of the practical
challenges in the establishment and development
of these initiatives: platform population, content
generation and sharing, sustainability of projects
(expert knowledge, skills, human and financial
resources), language diversity and accessibility,
comprehensiveness or gaps in policy information and
analysis?

Given the variety of mapping projects, and their
range in scope, approach, duration, and viability,
this kind of wide-ranging, critical discussion of
mapping is more important than ever. In many
ways, media mapping is at a crossroads. We need
it more than ever – to understand the rich and
complex state of play of global media policy, and
how goals of democratic participation, more
effective policy, and, in the end, better media, can be
achieved. Yet mapping, like everything, takes time
and dedication, and is difficult to do at scale, with
comprehensiveness, and rigour. This is no more so, if
we really care about genuinely international mapping
of media – where everyone’s media is put on the map,
in service of shaping better and fairer futures.

Further reading

Raboy&Padovani%202010_long%20version_final.pdf

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