

ssrc special feature

Special Section on Academic Research and Communications Policy

Introduction

MONROE E. PRICE

Annenberg School for Communication
University of Pennsylvania

STEFAN G. VERHULST

Markle Foundation

This informal collection is designed to further a dialogue about the relationship between communications research and policy making. In particular, it focuses on the impact of academic research on communications policy, and whether, and how, policy draws upon research (if at all). As quasi-editors (and commissioners of these essays), we have been highlighting various assumptions in the process. These assumptions mark every stage of the question (of the relevance of what academics do to what policy makers do). They mark an idealized mode of thinking about policy making — an idealized mode sometimes articulated in legislation or judicial decision (or agency practice). The assumptions include the following:

- Good and democratic policy making should be based upon an informed deliberation, and include relevant research findings.
- Policy making involves problem solving, guided change and conflict resolution.
- Communications research should be (designed to be) an important input into policy making.
- Policy makers have an appetite (or can be compelled to have an appetite) for research.
- There is room for "disinterested research" and possibly academic research has that quality.
- Academic research has a kind of methodological purity or excellence, or at least strives for that.
- There is a disconnect between the demand and supply of policy relevant communications research.

- This is a problem of access to research and data (although with the Internet, this has become more a "translation" and "communications" problem, i.e., researchers fail to communicate timely and for a broader audience).
- In part, the disconnect is a result of the difference between academic research and policy making with regard to:
 - Incentives (e.g., tenure/peer review vs. political viability);
 - Timetables (e.g., journal deadlines vs. immediately);
 - Format preferences (lengthy vs. succinct);
 - Agenda and relevance (old vs. new challenges and technologies);
 - Quality and validity standards (neutral vs. political);
 - Information about demand and supply.
- And in part, the problem is related with the ignorance and capacity of policy makers vis-à-vis using research.

What this effort hopes to do is to deepen and challenge these assumptions, as they relate to communications research and policy.

We were inspired, in part, to do this project by Professor Sandra Braman's edited volume *Communication Researchers and Policy-Makers* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), and by a February 24-25, 2008 "Necessary Knowledge" workshop on Collaborative Research & Advocacy for Media & Communications, organized by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and held at Annenberg School at the University of Pennsylvania.

The idea was to explore the edges of this question by having informal, almost personal, discussions and examinations of successful, failed or in between efforts to link academic (and other) research to communications policy. In this exercise, rather than using conventional frames for discussing the question of the relationship between research and policy, we would like to think through the complexities and idiosyncrasies of such efforts, to bring to the fore some of the discontinuities between the academic and policy making communities. We're interested, too, in the differences between the academy (and different disciplines within the academy) on the one hand and consultant-supplied information on the other—if such a difference indeed exists.

This collection of essays was distributed at the February 2008 Social Science Research Council workshop. The effort to enrich this collection will be conducted on an ongoing basis in cooperation with Minna Aslama at the SSRC. Our thanks to Minna Aslama and Libby Morgan of Annenberg's Center for Global Communication Studies, who significantly have contributed to the success of this project.