

# Towards a Model of Digital Policy Literacy

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## ABSTRACT

In this poster, a model of digital policy literacy is described. The model is designed to serve as an intervention expanding the core elements of media and digital literacy to encompass digital policy as a key literacy attribute. It has been created as a key element of a program of research that examines how young people engage in participatory digital culture, and their knowledge of specific digital policy issues, such as copyright and privacy.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.3.2 [Computers and Education]: Computer and Information Science Education – literacy.

## General Terms

Theory.

## Keywords

Media literacy, digital literacy, digital citizenship, digital policy literacy, youth, social media.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This poster provides a model for digital policy literacy that is a component of a research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). *Young Canadians, Participatory Digital Culture and Policy Literacy* has a dual focus: through interviews and focus groups with young Canadians (aged 15-22) it examines their use of digital technologies for entertainment, education, work, and civic participation, and assesses their knowledge of digital policy issues such as privacy and copyright. The main research questions that guide this research are: What are the everyday uses of digital technologies by youth? How do these practices shape their knowledge of digital policy issues? And, what tools and techniques can be mobilized to create participatory and innovative digital policy literacy toolkits? [16]

## 2. WHY DIGITAL POLICY LITERACY

Communication policy is broadly construed as the principles, processes, and procedures of various legal actions (legislation, court orders, or policy directives) governing the diverse uses of information and communication resources at the global, national, or community level. Understanding institutions of policy

governance and the various structures of participation for the policy process is key. Bachen et al. [2, p. 296] argue that digital policy issues offer “promising routes to engage youth in ethical deliberation, community volunteering, and organized political action because communication policy touches their lives directly through their own characteristic media usage.”

By foregrounding digital policy, this research project expands upon the tenets of media and digital literacy with their focus on critical reflections on media content that analyzes aesthetics, production, and ideology [1,12] while also considering how people “engage proactively in a media world where production, participation, social group formation, and high levels of nonprofessional expertise are prevalent” [10, p. 20]. Extending this approach, Livingston [13, p. 193] argues that we must understand young people’s digital literacy in the context of “the legibility of the interface”, referring to how technological affordances can activate or inhibit interactions. In other words, online environments are designed and marketed to exhibit benefits for the producer (e.g. surveillance and third party marketing in digital playgrounds) [11, 19]. It is thus important that young people become knowledgeable about the nuances of these infrastructures, various digital policy issues, the policymaking process, and how they might effectively intervene and potentially shape policy. These digital policy issues are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Digital Policy Issues

Access	Ownership, spectrum management, net neutrality, social inclusion
Content	Commercialization, acceptable use policies, data retention, authentication, freedom of speech, diversity
Privacy	Collection & retention of personal information, third party & behavioral marketing, surveillance, right to privacy
Copyright	Terms & conditions, fair use/fair dealing, digital rights management, open access, open source culture, Creative Commons

## 3. DIGITAL POLICY LITERACY MODEL

Digital policy literacy involves an understanding of policy processes, the political economy of media systems, and knowledge of digital infrastructures (see Table 2).

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*iConference 2012*, February 7-10, 2012, Toronto, ON, Canada.  
ACM 978-1-4503-0782-6/12/02.

The *policy process* is concerned with the principles and procedures of various legal actions that govern the diverse uses of communication resources at the global, national, and community level. Policy is constituted through an array of legal actions including legislation, court orders, and policy directives and decrees from government entities. An increasing trend is towards ‘self regulation’ or co-regulatory mechanisms by industry bodies. Since policy-making processes are increasingly fragmented, it is necessary to examine the various levels and agencies of governments, the increasing role of multi-lateral organizations such as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the role of civil society and activist groups. Given rapid increases and trends in globalization, a comparative analytic framework of policy as articulated and defined by national governments, and attempts at harmonizing regulation across national borders is apt [14].

Policy is highly politicized. Policymaking is about power. Who has it? Who doesn't? Who can influence the agenda? Who can mobilize one particular set of issues or agendas over the other? Who can make this power more visible? Whose ideology takes center stage? Whose frames rule? [7] It is also necessary to be cognizant of what policy issues are deemed *not* to matter. Freedman [8, p. 355] refers to this as policy silences: “Policy silence refers to the options that are *not* considered, to the questions that are kept *off* the policy agenda, to the players who are *not* invited to the policy table, and to the values that are seen as unrealistic or undesirable by those best able to mobilize their policy-making power.”

Policy processes also require knowledge of various *structures of participation in policymaking*. Analyzing structures of participation requires an understanding of the specific institutions of policy governance, the numerous formal to informal mechanisms of public participation, and the role of diverse stakeholders interested and involved in the policy issue. Activism is particularly key: what are effective modes of intervention to potentially shape policy?

Dutton's ecology of games framework [5, p. 287] incorporates the multiple dimensions shaping communications policy: “a policy ecology is defined by a set of games, structured by rules and assumptions about how to act in order to achieve a particular set of objectives.” This model investigates the various players involved in the policy process, the intended beneficiaries, and the process of policymaking. Given the increasing complexity of the media regime, Galperin [9, p. 163] argues that the theoretical framework of the new institutionalism, which unpacks the interrelated nature of institutions involved in the policy process – from formal to informal entities, to less structured and often impromptu arrangements – is an apt strategy. Both ideological and interest-group pressures are considered, with attention paid to both “the capabilities and constraints of those who make policy, but also of those who try to influence policy.”

Digital policy literacy also requires an understanding of the *political economy of communication* – the analysis of the social and political relations that constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of diverse media and information resources. A political economy of communication emphasizes the institutional network of communication and media products linking producers, distributors, retailers, and consumers. A political economy of communication focuses on media industries and institutions and issues such as media ownership and media concentration, the structural components of neoliberal policies (consolidation, diversification, privatization, commercialization,

internationalization, globalization, and public versus private media), power dynamics in media practices and policy, and alternative media practices towards social justice. Analyses examine the relationship between media and communication systems and the broader social structures of society, asking questions about how media systems reinforce, challenge, or influence existing class, gender, race and social relations [15].

Structural research is also characteristic of political economic policy research. While typically deployed to look at how media industries are created and maintained, the salient structural factors characteristic of the neoliberal agenda, wherein communication policies became increasingly linked to economic interests, are analyzed. This critique foregrounds the oppositional tension inherent in the public interest versus market fundamentalism [4]. This tension has both dramatically weakened the public interest in government policy discourse while at the same time strengthening the resolve of citizens' organizations to push for reform [15, 17].

As well, digital policy literacy involves *knowing the infrastructures*. How do technological affordances activate or inhibit interactions and ownership of content (on commercial / non-commercial platforms)? As an example, in considering privacy on social network sites, how do their affordances prescribe the activation of personal privacy settings – is ‘radical transparency’ the default setting that can traipse across different platforms?

Infrastructures can be thought of as a socio-technical system. In the case of digital infrastructures, we can envision them as encompassing the technical infrastructures of computer hardware and software, and the knowledge infrastructures of informational and communication systems governed by standards, operating procedures, and international governance regimes: “Beyond bricks, mortar, pipes or wires, infrastructure also encompasses more abstract entities, such as protocols (human and computer), standards, and memory” [3, p. 96]. While we often ascribe infrastructure as a material object, often monumental and operationally confusing to the non-expert, in reality many infrastructures are mundane, messy, often boring, and invisible; as Star writes, “large-scale information infrastructures, such as the Web and digital libraries, are making strangers of all of us, both designers and users” [18, p.5].

Within infrastructures are built-in values and regimes of power. These are often invisible yet become obvious when there is a breakdown, a controversy. Tensions can arise when infrastructures do not distribute their benefits to all citizens, raising “questions of ownership, management, control, and access” [6, p. ii].

**Table 2: Digital Policy Literacy Model Elements**

Policy Processes	How is policy constituted? What policy issues matter? What are structures of participation in policymaking? Activism—what are effective modes of intervention to shape policy?
Political Economy	What are the socio-political relations surrounding the ownership, production, distribution and consumption of media? How do they reinforce, challenge or influence social relations of class, gender and race?
Infrastructures	How do technological affordances and design activate or inhibit online interactions? What is their impact on ownership of content? What is their impact on protection of personal privacy?

#### 4. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for their support of the standard research grant, *Young Canadians, Participatory Digital Culture, and Policy Literacy*.

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