INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Gendering Global Media Policy:
Critical Perspectives on "Digital Agendas"

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Twenty years have passed since the international community committed to foster gender equity in communication by increasing "the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication" (Beijing 1995, *Platform for Action* of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Section J).[1] Much work remains to improve persistent gender inequalities across societies and to address major transformations—in technology and infrastructures, normative frameworks and policy arrangements—that have marked communication landscapes globally. This is a challenge that has recently been recognized also by the UNESCO-promoted Global Alliance for Media and Gender[2] (GAMAG) and by the Media Compact launched by UN Women.[3]

The year 2015 also marked ten years since the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS),[4] a relevant moment in international debates about digital governance: ten years of discourses, discussions, and decision making on how the Internet should be governed in venues, such as the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN),[5] the Internet Governance Forum (IGF),[6] and the Global Commission on Internet Governance (GCIG).[7]

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1. UN Women, *Beijing Declaration*.
2. See "Global Alliance for Media and Gender."
3. See UN Women, "Step It Up."
4. See *World Summit on the Information Society*.
5. See *ICANN*.
6. See "The Internet Governance Forum."
7. See "Global Commission on Internet Governance" and "Our Internet."

Different processes and policy-relevant debates and documents stemmed from those initial gatherings, but discursive paths have seldom crossed, in spite of the evident nexus between feminist concerns for gender-equal communication environments, and principles of inclusion, openness, and people-centered knowledge societies affirmed during and after WSIS. When efforts to acknowledge and instantiate gender equity into policy have transpired, it has been thanks to the efforts of scholars and advocates who managed to cross disciplinary and sectorial boundaries. These scholars and activists have explored connections and disconnections, fostering analytical frameworks capable of linking narratives from diverse policy domains, such as from gender equality and communication governance, thus reflecting and promoting gender and social justice perspectives.

This thematic collection is the result of a panel discussion in the context of the International Association of Media and Communication Research conference held in Montreal in July 2015 (IAMCR Global Media Policy Working Group).[8] The panel, and this ensuing issue of the *Journal of Information Policy*, is conceived as a scholarly contribution to the GAMAG and Media Compact, the WSIS+10 and the international commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;[9] and to ongoing discussions and strategies around digital policies, from the regional to the national and local levels.

Along with assessing the progress made in relation to the Beijing PfA Section J and of the WSIS Plan of Action after two decades, this issue introduces gender-aware perspectives on current trends in communication governance with an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural approach. In doing so, the collection also contributes to the development of more articulated, critical and evidence-based analytical and methodological frameworks for further investigating gender-sensitive policy developments in relation to media and information technologies. Expert authors from diverse geo-cultural contexts, from academia as well as the advocacy sector, address open issues related to "digital agendas": a label to indicate framework strategies, and related narratives, for the development and implementation of digital policies being adopted in most regional and national contexts.

We argue that it is crucial to assess if and how such strategies live up to the commitment, made twenty years ago, of fostering women's participation in communication, promoting women's right to communicate and

8. See "Global Media Policy Working Group."
9. UN Women, "The 2030 Agenda."

mainstreaming gender across all sectors. Contributors were therefore invited to identify and critically analyze regional/context-specific issues, as well as common challenges, pertaining to the development of "digital agendas" from gender-aware standpoints; and to discuss how gender (in)equalities, women (dis)empowerment, and emerging power structures may hinder future developments of communication and knowledge societies.

Several questions guide this multivocal conversation, amongst which: where are the women in media policy, as policy-makers, policy analysts, stakeholders, and scholars? Where, when and under what conditions are gender-aware perspectives taken into consideration in elaborating new policy frames and programs, from the local to the national, regional, and global level? What can we gain from adopting gender-aware perspectives—and methodologies—in investigating media policies and contributing to articulate the governance of communication? What can we learn from policy-oriented research projects and policy interventions that have adopted "gender" as an analytical lens in the past years, in view of future interventions?

This special issue of the *Journal of Information Policy* features five articles that present critical analyses on digital agendas in distinct regional and national contexts. In "Integrating Gender into Canadian Internet Policy: From the Information Highway to the Digital Economy," Leslie Regan Shade discusses material and discursive shifts in Canada's social and digital policy, and commitment to gender equality, over the past two decades, concluding with thoughts for engagement strategies for the new Liberal government and civil society toward digital and gender inclusion. Anita Gurumurthy, Nandini Chami, and Sanjana Thomas, in their article, "Unpacking Digital India: A Feminist Commentary on Policy Agendas in the Digital Moment," interrogate the Digital India strategy to unpack imaginaries of social inequalities and suppressed narratives, adopting as a standpoint their advocacy practice with Taking IT Global. Claudia Padovani, in "Gendering the European Digital Agenda: The Challenge of Gender Mainstreaming Twenty Years after the Beijing World Conference on Women," addresses some of those issues by focusing on the normative and regulatory context of, and on mobilizing networks engaging with, the European Digital Agenda, in order to assess to what extent a gender mainstreaming approach has permeated such developments. "Digital Transformations? Gendering the End User in Digital Government Policy" by Fiona Martin and Gerard Goggin discusses the Australian Digital Transformation Initiative and government commitment to online

and mobile friendly services, exploring how gender inequalities and empowerment figure in policy frameworks and politics. Anne Webb, in "Information and Communication Technology and Contesting Gender Hierarchies: Research Learnings from Africa and the Middle East," builds on in-depth ICT research to discuss what it takes for women to benefit from technologies in Africa and the Middle East, stressing that cultural and contextual elements should be integrated into policies and practices.

Common threads in the collection are a focus on narratives, discourses, and cognitive elements that are recognized as fundamental toward a better understanding of communication governance developments and their outcomes; and the awareness of contextual and structural elements within which policy interventions are planned and should be monitored and assessed. At the same time, nuanced national and regional pictures emerge, inviting more in-depth and comparative investigation across geo-cultural experiences.

In discussing the many issues at stake, this thematic issue also constitutes a dedication to a colleague and friend—Dr. Heike Jensen—who has widely contributed, through her work and personal commitment, to articulating the kind of critical understanding that is needed to overcome conceptual, analytical and policy disconnections toward gender-sensitive communication societies.

As Dr. Lisa McLaughlin recalled in her introductory comments to the IAMCR panel in Montreal:

> Heike Jensen was an independent researcher affiliated with the Department of Gender Studies at Humboldt University (Berlin, Germany). She passed away in February 2014. In her research and practice, Heike brought a gender justice perspective to global information society politics in venues and networks such as those of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), for which she was chair of the Gender Caucus, GigaNet, the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). As a member of the OpenNet Initiative (ONI) Asia research endeavor, Heike was part of a team that developed a gender-sensitive research framework concerning digital censorship and surveillance.

Acting as a publicly engaged scholar, as Marianne Franklin noted, Dr. Jensen widely contributed to "what we know about the textual nature

of internet governance consultative processes from the inside," but her work has also been appreciated "for her understanding of human temperaments, cultures and affiliations" that play a crucial role in orientating technological and policy developments.[10] Also, as Sonia Randhawa wrote, "By taking apart the structures of patriarchy, uncovering the power relations that are built into the institutions and architecture of the Internet, Heike consciously contributed to our ability to question, interrogate and rebuild those institutions in more equitable ways."[11]

Following Dr. Jensen's intellectual path (2005, 2009, 2011), this collection contributes to elaborating conceptual frameworks to investigate digital policy developments through the longitudinal reading that is needed to trace and make sense of discursive practices and persisting problems; analytical frameworks that highlight the gaps between consolidated normative principles and conflicting interests at play; normative frameworks that help uncover hegemonic relations—in ICT and internet discourses, politics and institutions—that affect gender but also race and age. In response to Jensen's call (2013), in this special issue of *JIP* we aim to elaborate the concepts and frames needed to unmask the apparent gender neutrality of guiding principles and priorities in information policy. In this light, cultural, political, and structural elements appear as intertwined and worth further exploration: access to infrastructure as well as to ownership, decision-making, and governance structures; the role of neoliberal ideology, private interests, and the impact of transnational media concentration on media diversity but also on (gendered) consumer cultures and models; the constructed and gendered nature of governance structures, and the constant possibility for social change and innovative alternatives.[12]

Working toward adequate conceptual, analytical, and normative frameworks is crucial in order to engage with emerging regulatory setups for Internet governance and digital agendas. We hope this collection provides elements toward much needed gender-aware critical perspectives that may be inspiring for scholars and students, professional communities, advocates, and decision-makers alike.

We would like to thank the editors at *JIP* for their avid interest in allowing us to pursue this special issue, especially Amit Schejter. We would

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10. Franklin.

11. Randhawa.

12. A list of Dr. Jensen's most relevant contributions has been compiled and is now available; see Padovani et al.

like to thank the many reviewers who provided extremely constructive and detailed commentary on the papers. And we are also very grateful to Managing Editor Michail Vafeiadis for his patience and humor as we navigated our way through the editorial process.

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