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Advocating for Media Law & Policy Education

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Advocating for Media Law & Policy Education



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All of us in academia are hyper-specialists, so we're prone to a little egocentrism when defending our turf with university peers and administrators. It's a tendency we should normally guard against. But right now, for all of us in this division, it's the perfect time to quash our inhibitions and unleash our inner advocate. The subjects we teach and study are so vital to the empowerment and self-fulfillment of individuals in the digital age, and are so central to the principal debates that are shaping the structure and character of our societies, that it just won't do anymore to keep them sequestered in j-schools and comm departments.

This is a critical moment to not only protect our courses in our departmental curricula but also to push these subjects, or versions of them, into university curricula as well. There is no reason why universities should not view media law and policy as natural components of a modern university education.

There are several reasons for this, which I addressed more fully in *Communication Law & Policy* ("Expanding Media Law and Policy Education: Confronting Power, Defining Freedom, Awakening Participation"). The most obvious is that everyone is now a mass communicator and without some

foundational constitutional and media law knowledge, people expose themselves to legal risk and coercion. They also limit their speech possibilities by not understanding the ways in which the First Amendment (access, newsgathering) and other sources of law (FOIA) can enable them to be influential citizen-communicators.

Another reason is that there are widening disparities in public opinion about the meaning and social function of freedom of speech and press. We are at the start of a uniquely disruptive period in First Amendment history, with critical choices to be made about micro-level issues — like how best to conceive of, and potentially bracket, hate speech, commercial speech, fake news, etc. — and about which macro-level framework to embrace as well. Should we double-down on the libertarian/neoliberal model reflected in current U.S. law and policy, drift toward the authoritarian approaches that are proliferating around the world, or embrace a more socially focused and pluralistic version like those that still endure in parts of Europe? None of these is predestined for us, and all citizens need to be equipped to help drive and respond to movement on these issues.

The third reason to expand media law and policy education is that the most consequential social and policy issues of our time involve media and expression (net neutrality, surveillance,

AI, big data, platform regulation, online privacy, media access), and our response to these issues will largely dictate the balance of social power in the coming decades. We need a generation of engaged citizens who can be leaders on these subjects. We can help prepare them through targeted course work and by creating opportunities for them to develop their ideas and contribute to public debate while still in school — all of which, not incidentally, would support the broader project of resuscitating young citizens' political efficacy and engagement.

There are different ways to achieve the goal of expanding media law and policy education, several of which are outlined in the CLP article, and some of which are already being put in place by our division colleagues. The form that these initiatives take is less important than the broader aims, for which all us can and should serve as unabashed evangelists.

Erik Ugland is an Associate Professor at Marquette University. His article, "Expanding Media Law and Policy Education: Confronting Power, Defining Freedom, Awakening Participation" appears in Vol. 24, Issue 2 of Communication Law & Policy.