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Telecommunications policy: The medium is the message

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ABSTRACT

Reflecting on his involvement with *Telecommunications Policy*, since 1979, this article by one of its first editors Colin Blackman, contributes to the 40th anniversary issue. It describes the launch of the journal, the unique nature of its publisher, IPC Science & Technology Press, the way in which the field has changed over the past four decades, and makes some personal observations about the changing nature of the world of journal publishing.

1. Introduction

I was delighted to be invited to contribute an article to help mark the 40th anniversary of the launch of *Telecommunications Policy (TP)*.[1] Perhaps because of my involvement with the journal, which stretches back to 1979, I am well placed to comment on the journal and its development over the past four decades. What follows is my personal reflection on the launch of the journal, the unique nature of *TP* and its publisher in its early years (IPC Science & Technology Press), its relation to the then nascent field of telecommunications policy, and my editorial involvement with the journal.

2. Hanging on the telephone

TP was launched as a quarterly journal [2] in December 1976 with Lawrence H. (Larry) Day as external editor. Larry, who was Assistant Director-Business Planning with Bell Canada at the time, had brought the idea to *Futures*, one of IPC S&T's flagship journals. *Futures* was a well-established and influential bimonthly journal concerned with futures research and long-range planning and was the instigator of several other policy and management journals, including *Energy Policy, Tourism Management* and *Space Policy*. The decision to establish *TP* was most likely taken in late 1975 or early 1976, following a feasibility study, market analysis and the making of the business case beginning in mid-1975.

TP was a response to the growing realisation that the telephone and telecommunications were a fundamental driver of the economy, that technology in information and communications technology was advancing rapidly and was bringing new challenges for government policy and regulation as well as new business opportunities. In the early 1970s, some futurists (eg Daniel Bell), economists (eg Fritz Machlup) and social scientists (eg Yoneji Masuda) were writing about the coming information society, but understanding of the economic, technical, legal and social forces driving this transformational change was still rather limited, as was understanding of the policy and regulation that might be needed in response. Before the internet, information was scarce and difficult to access. In the mid-1970s

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[1] When published by IPC Science & Technology Press, Butterworth Scientific and Butterworth Heinemann, *Telecommunications Policy* was abbreviated internally to "TP". When published by Elsevier, its internal acronym became "TelPol" or "JTPO".

[2] It has also steadily increased its frequency from a quarterly journal in 1976, to a bimonthly in 1990, 10 issues a year in 1996, to the current curious number of 11 issues a year.

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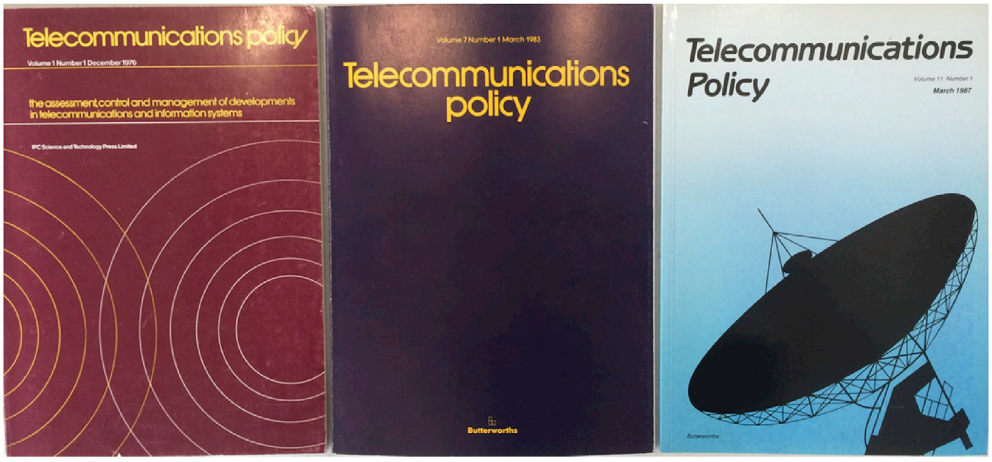

Fig. 1. Telecommunications Policy covers from 1976, 1983 and 1987.

governments had little knowledge and understanding of the field, primarily because telecommunications was almost exclusively the domain of state-owned, operated and regulated monopolies, a domain that was the preserve of telecommunications engineers.

Academic study of the area was also rather limited and fragmented, the interest of a relatively small number of individuals – drawn from economists, lawyers, engineers, political and social scientists. In the USA, there was more of an academic tradition in communications through departments of mass communications, and radio, TV, theatre and film, but elsewhere the academic study of telecommunications policy was patchy to say the least. In the UK, for instance, the academic study of these topics was almost non-existent. Indeed, its most influential analysts were to be found in boutique consultancies, such as Communications Studies and Planning, a company spun out from University College London by academics such as Michael Tyler, Barry Stapley, Martin Elton and Roger Pye.

So launching a journal on telecommunications policy in the mid-1970s could be considered either as a risky endeavour or prescient. One of the characteristics of IPC S&TP was its ability to identify new trends, particularly before they entered the academic mainstream, and I will elaborate further on this later on. Following its launch, it quickly became clear that there was a real need for a journal on this topic and, compared to other IPC S&TP journal launches, *TP* grew rapidly over its first few years of publication in terms of the number of subscribers – academic as well as business and government.

This mixed target audience was also reflected in the editorial board, which contained some prestigious names, such as Wally Baer, Henry Boettinger, Colin Cherry, John Diebold, Martin Elton, Herve Nora and Ithiel de Sola Pool, to name a few. Of the 30 original members, only nine were academics, while seven were in government or international organisations, six in consulting or business research organisations, six were from telecom operators, and two from other business sectors.

It is fascinating to look at the content and contributors in the first issue and see the breadth of issues covered, such as:

- Ithiel de Sola Pool on “International aspects of computer communications”,
- Edwin B. Parker on “Social implications of computer/telecoms systems”,
- Michael Tyler on “Telecommunications and energy policy”,
- Paul Polishuk on “Telecommunications policy making and institutions of the US government”,
- Francine E. Gordon on “Telecommunications: implications for women”, and
- Jacques Vallée on “Distributed management of scientific projects”.[3]

Content in the first volume was certainly dominated by US authors, with several articles on US communications policy, the liberalization debate and the positions of the FCC and AT&T. There is also a thread in early issues on international communications, the ITU and OECD, and standards, and also several articles on telecommunications and developing countries. Absent from the first volume is much attention on Europe, including the UK.

3. Deeper understanding

TP could probably not have been conceived and launched by any other publisher. IPC S&TP was a remarkable company. Its

[3] Jacques Vallée was one of the journal's original editorial board members. In the Steven Spielberg film, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, Vallée served as the model for the French researcher character, Lacombe (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques%5fVall%c9e).

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