Background and context
This panel proposes a reading of cohesion in European politics from a gender perspective, focusing on the concept and practices of gender mainstreaming as a potential resource to reduce inequalities and gender discrimination; and it does so with a focus on the media sector, broadly understood.

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). Much work remains to improve persistent gender inequalities across societies and major transformations – in technology and infrastructures, normative frameworks and policy arrangements - that have marked communication landscapes globally; a challenge which has recently been recognized also by the Unesco-promoted Global Alliance for Media and Gender (Gamag) and by a UN-Women promoted Media Compact, calling media organizations worldwide to take responsibility for the necessary changes.

2015 also marked ten years since the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS), 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 ICANN, the Internet Governance Forum and the Global Commission on Internet Governance.

Different processes and policy-relevant debates stemmed from those global gatherings and the documents adopted; but discursive and policy 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-centred knowledge societies affirmed during and after WSIS. When this happened, it has been thanks to the efforts of scholars and advocates who managed to cross disciplinary and sectorial boundaries, explore connections and disconnections, foster analytical frameworks capable of linking narratives from diverse policy domains – those of gender equality and of communication governance – thus reflecting and promoting gender and social justice perspectives.

This presentation builds on a panel discussion organized in the context of the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) conference held in Montreal, July 2015; and on the collection of panel papers in a themed issue of the Journal of Information Policy titled “Gendering Global Media Policy: Critical Perspectives on ‘Digital Agendas’”, forthcoming in 2016. The collection introduces gender-aware perspectives on current trends in the development of framework strategies, and related narratives, for the development and implementation of digital policies being adopted in most regional and national contexts.
Given the strategic relevance of these developments that impact on the economy, politics and socio-cultural dimensions – and the crucial role of digital developments in relation to societal capacity to address and overcome inequalities - the collection addresses questions such as: where are the women in media policy, as policy-makers, policy analysts, stakeholders and scholars? Where, when and at 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?

Mainstreaming gender in digital policies: starting from Europe …

My contribution to the collection addresses those questions and explores, in particular, if and to what extent norms of gender equality and gender mainstreaming have been recognized and implemented in the European Digital Agenda.

In order to do so, a multi-dimensional framework to the study of historical and recent developments of European policies for the information and knowledge society. Such framework - inspired by feminist approaches to the study of world politics¹ - includes consideration for the social construction of meanings in policy developments, the structuring of ideational elements of governance into frames, discourses and norms and the resulting historical variability, hence opening up the possibility for change. It also calls for theorizing about power in ways that uncover hidden and gender unequal power relations, focusing on actors’ interactions and their capacity to influence policy processes on the basis of their preferences and interests².

Consistently with these theoretical concerns, and building on previous feminist investigations on gender mainstreaming in European policies, the analysis assumes gender mainstreaming as an “organizing principle”³ for policy developments, and includes a review of the European policy narratives for both the information society and for gender mainstreaming since the mid ‘90s. Then, in order to assess the relevance of such organizing principle, it focuses on 3 aspects: the Political Opportunity Structure of the Digital Agenda launched in 2010; on the frames adopted with regard to gender concerns in documents, initiatives and events; and on the mobilizing networks that have contributed over the past years to mainstream gender in digital developments.

Table 1 provides a synthetic depiction of the multi-dimensional framework and how it is applied in the following paragraphs.

² Claudia Padovani and Elena Pavan, “Global Governance and ICTs: Exploring online governance networks around Gender and Media” in Global Networks (forthcoming 2016).
Table 1 – A multi-dimensional framework to investigate gender mainstreaming in European digital policies

<table>
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<th>Dimensions of gendered (digital) policy analysis</th>
<th>Methodologies and focus</th>
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<td>Historical variability over time</td>
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<td>Evolution of policy narrative</td>
<td>Review of policy narrative on the European information society</td>
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<td>Structural elements &amp; openness of political system</td>
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As far as the historical legacy it has been clearly highlighted a very marginal focus on gender equality in the Union’s policy discourse towards smart and sustainable growth, and the creation of an “all-inclusive digital society”.

Two decades of interventions to design a European area of innovation and knowledge have barely included any reference to norms of gender equality, nor reflected the gender mainstreaming principle. When women were mentioned, this was in relation to very specific aspects (i.e. different opportunities for telework or the key skills needed for to improve employability), instrumental to the idea of making the EU a global knowledge-based economy. This absence persists in the most recent documents, such as the Communication “Taking stock of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth” (COM(2014) 130 final/2). In reviewing the 100 indicators of the DA, and identifying 7 priority areas of intervention – including a new and stable broadband regulatory environment, new public digital service infrastructures, and a Grand Coalition on Digital Skills and Jobs – the term “gender” appears only once, alongside age and regional differences, to stress persisting inequalities.

As per the Political Opportunity Structure, both openness of the political system and the presence and role of allies from within European institutions is assessed. Since 2010, a number of open public consultations have been launched⁴, as a means to involve European citizens in the elaboration of the DA strategy, but none of those consultations focused explicitly on gender issues⁵. At the same time, different stakeholders have performed consultative processes, and channelled their claims through the European institutions. This has been the case of

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⁵ Personal communication with Maria Sangiuliano, at the time Deputy Director ECTW, 6 July 2015.
a 2010 initiative by the European Center for Women and Technology (ECWT), which launched a consultation amongst its partners, based on which a “Position Paper on Gender and Technologies: Lining up for a Gender Action-Plan for the Digital Agenda” was elaborated. This presented a number of concrete proposals towards the elaboration of a Gender Action Plan for the DA, which would include: formal consultative processes, a call for more elaborated disaggregated statistics, a multi-sectorial approach to gender equality that would involve different DGs (Education and Research, Entrepreneurship, Employment and Workforce) and a call for multi-actor partnerships. The ECWT thus contributed to raising the profile of gender issues in the DA narrative.

Crucial to these developments is the support of an institutional entity, the European Institute for Gender Equality, and of élite allies like Viviane Reding and Neelie Kroes, who served, respectively, as Information Society Commissioner and as Commissioner for the Digital Agenda and Vice-President of the EU, over the period 2008-2014. Gender-oriented initiatives and high-level meetings saw the support of both commissioners, and other high profile female figures from different European institutions.

It can therefore be said that, though formal documents on digital strategies have shown scant attention to gender equality norms and operational principles, in recent years calls have multiplied to address this gap. What remains to be seen is how sustainable this emerging orientation is, as élite supporters like Reding and Kroes are no longer in leadership position in the DA institutional framework; this is particularly relevant, since only a diffused gender-sensitive culture and sustained mobilizing structures, both operating across offline and online spaces of interaction, could guarantee sustained commitment towards gender equality in future digital developments.

As for the framing of gender issues in policy developments, it should be highlighted that in the Digital Agenda strategy, adopted in 2010, a very specific reading of gender equality is included in a list of one hundred objectives and actions to be addressed. Pillar VI of the Agenda – titled “Enhancing digital literacy, skills and inclusion” – tackles aspects of the digital divide, and includes the only specific reference to women: Action 60 refers to the need to “Increase participation of women in the ICT workforce; to reverse and improve the lack of female workforce in the ICT sector”. And this remains as the mainframe around which energies have been mobilized and initiatives undertaken.

http://womenandtechnology.eu. Active since 2008 as a non-for-profit organization, the ECWT is a multi-stakeholder partnership of over a hundred entities, reflecting expertise in women and technology development. Its goal is to improve women’s role in traditionally male dominated fields such as the ICT and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and to value their potentials in terms of innovation, creativity and leadership. The Center also operates as the European Point of Contact of a common global framework based on the “Declaration of the International Task Force for Women and ICT”, recognized by the UN Global Alliance for Information and Communication Technologies and Development (G AID) as a Community of Expertise for Gender and ICT.


The European context seems to be unaware of the much more articulated discussion that has taken place over the past 10 years, in formal international gatherings and official publications. For instance, the Broadband Commission Working Group on Broadband and Gender, in 2013, acknowledged the need to integrate gender in national ICT and broadband policies and to improve sex-disaggregated ICT statistics and measurement. Furthermore, steps to boost the affordability and usability of ICT products and services should parallel efforts to improve relevant content online, while policies informed by gender-relevant data and knowledge should include a focus on services that facilitate active participation. At the same time, several contributions have come from civil society organizations, stressing the need to move beyond the assumption that digital technologies are empowering “per se”, which still seems to prevail in EU narratives. These perspectives reflect explicitly the gender mainstreaming approach and indicate that gender differences are to be considered in the design, implementation and evaluation phases; and the analysis of social, cultural and economic situations should inform ICT policies, in their integration with other policies.

Coming to consider mobilizing actors and energies around the Digital Agenda, the analysis focused on networks of actors, governmental and nongovernmental, that operate as mobilizing structures for gender equality, contributing to the elaboration of discourses and positions, organizing and participating in events, and design and implement initiatives. And it does so looking at the discursive spaces constituted by actors’ online interactions, using as an entry point the European Center for Women and Technologies, which presents itself as a multi-stakeholder network aimed at increasing the number of women in technology and education, research and innovation, workforce, entrepreneurship, leadership and the media. The resulting picture is that of a fragmented set of actors; this suggests a limited capacity to coordinate forces and promote change, amongst those very actors that have declared their interest in fostering gender equality according to EU goals. The discursive space is also characterized by a disconnection between institutional and societal dynamics in spite of a certain degree of openness in the EU opportunity structure; and likely to be centered around the main, yet narrow, frame of gender equality in digital Europe that stems from institutional perspectives, and is channeled through professional and educational agencies.

What emerges from this initial exploratory analysis is a limited plurality of actors involved in the online conversation, most of which do not have gender equality as their main focus and concern.

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10 The network is traced making use of a tool called Issue Crawler designed to systematically crawl the Web and trace sets of resources and websites that share a thematic focus on a specific issue, and are connected amongst themselves via hyperlinks (www.issuecrawler.net).
The analysis shows that, twenty years after the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women, gender mainstreaming in European digital policy remains a challenge.

... and moving beyond Europe

In order to better understand the implications of European policy orientations towards equalities and inequalities in relation to digital developments, it is meaningful to contextualize European internationally. The JIP collection hosts contributions that critically analyze - from gender-aware standpoints - regional/context-specific issues, as well as common challenges, pertaining to the development of ‘digital agendas' that have being introduced between 2010 (European Digital Agenda), 2014 (Digital Canada) and 2015 (Digital India and Digital Transformation Initiative in Australia). Common threads in the collection are a focus on narratives, discourses and cognitive elements that, reflecting feminist methodologies and approaches, are recognized as fundamental towards 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.

Leslie Shade discusses material and discursive shifts in Canada’s social and digital policy, and commitment to gender equality, over the past decade and up to Digital Canada 150, stressing how institutional commitment to gender equality in ICT and related policies that characterized the mid ‘90s and early 2000 have been abandoned by the Harper government; thus leading to dismissing good practices that had been internationally acknowledged as models.

Anita Gurumurty and Nandini Chami interrogate the Digital India strategy launched by the new Modi government, to unpack imaginaries of social inequalities and suppressed narratives, adopting as a standpoint her advocacy practice with Taking IT Global. In doing so they highlight the tension between patriarchal and progressive narratives that characterizes Indian policy discourse; and the disciplining approach to citizenship which obscures structural inequalities, posing the burden of change on individuals on the basis of the assumption that connectivity equals inclusion.

Gerard Gogging and Fiona Martin discuss the Australian Digital Transformation agenda and government commitment to online ‘accessible, usable and secure’ government services, exploring how gender inequalities and empowerment figure in policy frameworks and politics. They underline the limit of an approach that only sees neutral/non-gendered ICT users, stressing that the DTI is not a remedy for differentiated an uneven access, connectivity and affordability, but rather it is about convenience, efficiency and productivity.

Though nuanced national and regional pictures emerge, inviting more in-depth and comparative investigation across geo-cultural experiences, here it may be interesting to highlight the common features emerging from the analyses:\[11\]:

\[11\] A 5th contribution to the collection focuses on Middle East and NorthAfrica but does not speak directly to official policies adopted at the national or regional level.
very marginal gender awareness can be traced in governmental and supranational policy frameworks and interventions on digital developments;

- gender mainstreaming, as defined in institutional documents\(^{12}\), has not found its way into the digital domain;

- some kind of essentialism lies at the heart of digital agendas: the assumption being that ‘digital is better’ and connectivity equals empowerment is seldom articulated to consider how digital developments may also strengthen inequalities;

- In most cases we find only one explicit mention of gender in a wide number of policy documents, and that one mention provides the basic framing according to which issues are addressed and policy intervention designed: in the EU this is about girls and women in ICT sector; in India it is the patriarchal approach to ‘save/educate our girls’; in Australia it is about gender roles in culturally and linguistically diverse populations…;

- no awareness is found in digital strategies of the complexities - including intersectional - that characterize women and men experiences with ICT (design, adoption, use etc)

- new political leaderships with neoliberal orientation (Canada, Harper 2006-2015; Australia, Abbott after 2013; India, Modi after 2014) have been characterized by step-backs in gender equality policies, with the abandonment of funding schemes, growing gender pay gaps and critical reports written on the occasion of Beijing+20;

- the neoliberal approach is also characterized by: a) policy focus on individuals as sites of inequality and solutions, without due recognition of structural constrains, nor of the potential of collective response to societal inequalities; and b) policies are less aligned with concepts of equality and inclusion than convenience, efficiency, productivity and cost reduction.

Concluding remarks

International studies and feminist scholarship from around the globe have produced knowledge about the causes of inequality and specific challenges to gender inclusive knowledge societies; but these remain disregarded in European policy circles, as well as in most national digital strategies worldwide. Neo-liberal frames prevail in relation to ICT contribution to societal development; in this context fostering access to the IT sector (including gendered) is a means to contribute to boosting countries’ and regions’ global competitiveness productivity and efficiency rather then a path to reducing persisting inequalities.

Efforts are being made by networks of nongovernmental actors - including women’s groups and gender-focused civic organizations - to mobilize energies towards a better understanding of gender equality in the many areas of digital transformations; yet these mobilizing structures either tend to

\(^{12}\) “The systematic integration of the respective situations, priorities and needs of women and men in all policies and with a view to promoting equality between women and men and mobilizing all general policies and measures specifically for the purpose of achieving equality by actively and openly taking into account, at the planning stage, their effects on the respective situations of women and men in implementation, monitoring and evaluation”. European Commission COM(96)67 final on Incorporating Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in All Community Policies and Activities, 21 February 1996.
gravitate around the narrow institutional approach (as in the European case) or have been marginalized even in contexts where their contribution was highly valued (as in Canada before 2006).

As a result, gender equality concerns have not gained adequate status in digital policies and discourses worldwide; and this constitute a major shortcoming when it comes to addressing societal inequalities through technology-based strategies for the future. In the end, both political will and a diffused culture of gender equality are needed to seriously implement gender mainstreaming as an operational principle, through adequate procedures and mechanisms - including indicators for equality, organizing for on-going monitoring, and implementing gender budgeting options – as well as through policies that are responsive to inclusive and equity oriented principles and norms. This clearly remains a major challenge for European cohesion, at the regional as well as national and local levels.