Public Policy and Media Convergence – Paths, Limitations and Prospects
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Peter Humphreys and Seamus Simpson (2018)

Regulation, Governance and Convergence in the Media, Cheltenham and Northampton MA: Edward Elgar.

Introduction

- Media convergence has a relatively long history and is multi-faceted

- The processes of media convergence and its governance continue to present many challenging and as yet unanswered policy questions

- Biggest problem, often under-acknowledged in confident assertions about convergence, is its only partially complete, contested and precarious nature

- It is important to understand that the coming together of different forms and elements of media, often into a common space, does not automatically lead to their integration

Media Convergence

- The coming together in various ways of the technologies, platforms, services and markets of broadcasting, IT, the Internet, telecommunications and publishing

Media Governance and Media Policy

Des Freedman (2008: 14) defines media governance as:

'the sum total of mechanisms, both formal and informal, national and supranational, centralised and dispersed, that aim to organise media systems according to the resolution of media policy debates'…

…where the latter are sites of contested and continual

'development of goals and norms leading to the creation of instruments that are designed to shape the structure and behaviour of media systems'

Media Convergence and Governance

- Focus on the nature and processes of media convergence governance allows an explanation to be provided for the problematic and incomplete character of media convergence

- Knowledge of the institutional landscape and communication policy processes in which media convergence issues are considered and (often incompletely) resolved is essential to an understanding of how and why media convergence has developed to date, as well as its future prospects

- Neo-liberal policy agendas and governance, developed and deployed in the communications sector over recent decades, have gone hand-in-hand with media convergence in many respects

Neo-liberalism and Media Convergence

- Need to stimulate developments in media technologies and the new goods and services stemming from them are considered of paramount importance

- This should be achieved through market-based changes to create competition, alongside developments in governance arrangements to secure reformed market structures promoting competition

- Media convergence and neo-liberalism share the common feature of having been propounded as inevitable, inexorable and irresistible

- The view that technological changes create new enhanced services in an environment of unparalleled consumer choice has led to arguments that governance structures and media policy arrangements need to change to accommodate and bring to fruition the benefits of convergence

Technological Changes in ICT and Convergence

- Digitisation or, more plainly, the application of computer-based communication technologies to other parts of communication, in the first instance telecommunications, meant that at least techno-functionally, combinations of voice, data, text and video could be created and delivered across 'standard' telecommunication infrastructure

- Extra transmission capacity that this would require would be delivered through development of fibre optic cable technology heralded even as early as the 1970s, as providing a context for high-speed, content-laden, and interactive networked-based communication

- Use of the airwaves for personal communication became a reality in the shape of an embryonic mobile communications sector. The digitisation of the airwaves soon followed as a convergence-based, partial solution to capacity problems of microwave communication.

Technological Changes in ICT and Convergence

- Broadening of telecommunications into so-called enhanced services realm raised the possibility of (widening the) transmission of audiovisual content through copper and fibre optic broadband networks

- The fairly well established technology of international satellite communication was developed and applied to provide domestic television services resulting in an unprecedented increase in network capacity

- Digitisation of broadcast communication networks gathered pace through the 1990s. The first and most immediate impacts were a 'turbo charging' of the trend towards network capacity expansion. Digitalisation in broadcasting affected cable, satellite and terrestrial networks alike.

The Internet and Media Convergence

- Emerging from the shadows of network-based communication, by the mid-1990s the Internet was illustrating its power to become the most significant development in mass communication since television

- Although it was developed through the creation of bespoke communication architecture to some extent, for it to realise its full significance Internet traffic needed to utilise longer established telecommunication infrastructure.

- Internet communication protocols, assisted by a raft of technical innovations which enabled user-friendly 'point and click' environments, provided both the oil and the glue of media convergence

The Internet and Media Convergence

- Those with operational control of network transmission provided common carriage services for the growing, increasingly content rich and diverse volume of traffic that Internet communication was giving rise to

- The online environment became characterised by the potential to collapse, in a way never before witnessed, the distinction between telecommunication, radio and televisual broadcasting, and journalism and book publishing

- One of the most significant features of the Internet in the last 10 years has been its development as a site for social networking platforms

- The emergence of so-called social media has a fleeting resonance only with the early ideas of communitarian-based communication. Whilst these are venues within which an enormous mass of information is exchanged between human beings, the environment is heavily underpinned by commerciality.

- Emergence of the Internet has created a global communicative logic, and increased user friendliness has fuelled expectations of a new, richer, faster, more interactive 24-hour communications environment. The global Internet is often seen as the epitome of media convergence

Contested perspectives on Media Convergence

- Convergence as an inevitable process shaped by technological innovations and commercial development

- Convergence drives cultural, economic and social development

The Underpinnings of Media Convergence Governance

- Neoliberal governance changes in traditional aspects of ICT in response to technological change

- Emergence of the Internet with libertarian origins and, thereafter, market liberal values and modus operandi

Media Policy Research and Convergence

- Contextualise – and as a consequence deflate – the hyperbole which often surrounds convergence

- Translate this into clear messages which might be listened to – if not adopted – by national and international policy making communities

Developing Public Policy for Media Convergence

- A media sector rhetorically underpinned by visions of individual fulfilment and development delivered through growing consumerism and fast-paced market and service-based change

- In such a predominant cultural landscape, the provision of media infrastructures and services through public action can seem outmoded, if not redundant

- Convergence is still very much in development and, as such, presents considerable opportunities

- Media governance and policy can set the context for a more inclusive and progressive process of convergence to unfold

- Policies should be underpinned by a recognition of the interconnected and often overlapping nature of media convergence

- They should understand that public provision, protection and promotion of digital convergence infrastructure and content is a relevant and reasonable media policy goal

Infrastructure

- Adoption of flexible policy approaches which combine private sector led investment with a stronger public sector vision and interventionism than has been hitherto the case is warranted

- Policies for network upgrade must go beyond facilitation of market-based solutions where state aid is tolerated somewhat apologetically as a second best, sub-optimal, safety net

- Neither should public sector aid be viewed as a first stage, pre-commercial, temporary policy solution read in the context of a neo-liberal lens

Mobility and Spectrum

- Keep the public interest uses of spectrum at the forefront of media policy agendas

- Speed and extent of migration of broadcasting to IP-based networks is likely to be critical

- The performance of the mobile communications sector in its use of allocated spectrum should be an ongoing concern of regulatory authorities

- Undertake a comparative analysis by determining the public value generated historically and contemporaneously by terrestrial broadcast players in their occupation of the spectrum

- Changes to the allocation of spectrum away from broadcasters, both commercial and publicly funded, which hold a public service mission, should not stymy the development of progressive policies for media content

- Reconsideration of wirelessly provided services as delivering at least in part a public service function in terms of enriching digital citizenship

Internet Neutrality

- Developing existing understandings of Net Neutrality since drawing upon and taking forward the idea of intervention exposes the myth of neutrality and the paucity of a laissez faire strategy

- Selective intervention as a media policy tool to create a new and enlightened understanding of neutrality as an environment of equal communications opportunity and rights

- Challenge the idea of neutrality as a passive concept in policy terms and assert the need to intervene proactively in online communication environments to deliver enriched public utility which capitalises on the collapsing distinction between one-to-one and one-to-many communicative interactions

- incorporate and re-work media policy ideas from the realm of broadcasting to focus on the attainment of equality of access and participation rather than non-interference

Media Power: Concentration

- Media concentration is a complex problem in the digital, online world

- There should be a sufficient range of independent media voices with extensive reach and accessibility to allow citizens to be exposed to and consume news, information and sociocultural content from a pluralistic and diverse range of sources

- In the digital, online era, there are particular concerns about the viability of a restrictive approach. Media markets are fluid and converging, rendering it far more difficult to determine the relevant market for regulatory intervention

- Forcing divestment might lead to an even greater diminution of pluralism in media markets - newspaper markets in particular - that are seeing rapid disappearance of titles due largely to the Internet's impact both on advertising and on media consumption habits

Media Power: Concentration

- There are still approaches to cross-media regulation that can be deployed to measure concentrations of media power

- There are behavioural obligations that can be laid on companies with significant media power: a company deemed by the regulator to have achieved a threshold of media power might be required to open up its media service to editorially independent, third-party journalism

- Media companies with significant market such power could be required to introduce measures designed to ensure journalistic autonomy and be required to fulfil public service obligations

- Take steps to democratise powerful media companies: Legislation might be introduced to provide for editorial codes of practice or company statutes that would protect journalists' integrity and independence

- A degree of internal pluralism and editorial independence from proprietorial control could be guaranteed by providing for pluralistically composed independent content advisory councils within the largest, most influential commercial broadcasting organisations

Public Service Media Policies

- To counterbalance private commercial accumulations of media power that by dint of the international nature of the online world escape easy regulation, it will be necessary to maintain strong, well-resourced public-service media providers which have an extensive content remit and which are given the means to develop into public service media for the Internet era

- Their internally pluralistic services should serve as a vital counterbalance to a commercial sector where there is evidence of sufficient external pluralism commercially (due to there being high media concentration)

- Public policy support for media pluralism need to be considered. Subsidies should be considered for crisis-ridden newspapers, for launching new online ventures, for independent producers, regional production, community radio and TV.

- Employ a 'technology-neutral' approach to subsidising 'public service journalism'.

Public Service Media Policies

- Raise an industry levy on the profits of those commercial companies which enjoy significant market power in the advertising and pay-TV markets.

- Provide public support to the media sector through public–private partnerships to help new Internet start-ups and provide a means to help alleviate the crisis of the press sector to allow it to establish itself in digital era

- So long as it is not funded by 'top-slicing' existing PSB funds, create a new Public Service Publisher-type institution to disburse funds on a transparent and contestable basis

- In the age of digital convergence, public service communication should not be conceived as something only related to broadcasting

Conclusion

- Risk of reduced policy effectiveness in a digital media environment should be acknowledged and understood as a feature that 'comes with the territory' of media convergence

- Leverage this through developing international policy exchange fora for media convergence to help understand the problems of convergence and the different perspectives taken on it

- Reduced ability of the media policy tool of regulatory governance to be effective on its own points to the potential utility of combinative policy action

- Given the complex, multi-layered nature of media convergence, design media policy package-based solutions which could combine technical, legal, regulatory, fiscal, and educative tools

- Whilst this may seem a potentially messy and ineffective response to convergence, whilst requiring innovativeness and flexibility in thinking and implementation, it is one likely to yield the most fruitful outcomes