

Essay Question:

Where does communication policy come from, and how is it made? Give examples to back your argument. (use readings from weeks 2 & 3 in particular)

Media Policy: Emergence and Formulation

Introduction

Media, according to Nicholas Garnham (quoted by Raboy 2002, p. 5-6), are “systems for production, distribution and appropriation of symbolic forms... based on the development and deployment of technologies of communication.” Media policy is the stage upon which the state interacts with the media industries. This essay will look at the emergence and formation of communications policy.

First, it will explain what media and communications policies are. Next, the paper will dive deeper into where these policies emerge from. It will list and explore the various reasons for the existence of media policy to map the emergence of policies within the political atmosphere using various examples to illustrate the points. Lastly, the paper will also try and explain how communications policy is made and what influences it.

What are media and communication policies?

Media policy, in the simplest terms, refers to the practice of governmental intervention to control, regulate and structuralise these various technologies of culture and communication. It is a process which involves not just the state or the public, but also various other stakeholders who each try and exert their power to influence the management of media in their favour (Freedman, 2008, p. 13).

It can be understood that with media being so varied, each type would need policies specific to it to best suit the interests of the most powerful and influential stakeholders.

According to Nicholas Garnham (as quoted by Freedman, 2008, p. 16), media policies can be broadly divided into two categories: Mass Media Policy and Telecommunications Media Policy. The former focuses on the press and broadcasting, while the latter focuses on networks facilitating private communication (i.e., mobile networks, the internet, etc.).

However, with increasing globalisation and technological convergence, separating the two policies is hard. Mass media has permeated into the telecommunications space, and telecommunications has begun to dominate mass media. Thus, it has become possible to link them under the umbrella term of media policies, with an important aspect of understanding becoming the analysis of the most powerful stakeholders.

Where do media and communication policies come from?

The emergence of communication policies can be understood through the reasons for their existence, i.e., why communications policies exist.

“Power, including political power largely depends on the capacity to influence people’s minds by intervening in the processes of social communication” (Castells, 2010, p. 4). The media is situated right within this landscape. Controlling the processes of social communication through the introduction of newer technologies is a process central to the existence of the media industry.

Take for example, the internet. The introduction and diffusion of the internet as a communications technology forever changed the way we view communication. What was largely centered around print and broadcast media, is now based on a virtual presence. There are now a vast number of ways to communicate, from emails and SMS to social media, microblogging platforms, video uploads and podcasts. This gives the internet, and by extension media industries, a certain amount of power over information and its dissemination (Castells, 2010).

Des Freedman makes a case for this situation by stating, “media products are not ordinary commodities but systems and networks endowed with special political and cultural significance” (Freedman, 2008). Policy becomes important here as a result of the social importance that media systems hold within various spheres. Media has begun to penetrate the political, corporate and personal sphere like never before, and intervention becomes necessary for regulation and control over these industries.

Policy is the intervention that government bodies employ to exercise control and to ensure that media continues to work within the bounds of the sovereign. This is reflected in the way that some nation states have begun to approach digital sovereignty.

Digital Sovereignty refers to the concept that participants (state or otherwise) have ownership of their own data. In terms of the state, this manifests in the form of restrictive regulation that prohibits the transfer of its citizen’s data outside the states borders. Several data protectionist laws such as the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation, China’s refusal to let any international data flow, and India’s rules regarding the usage of consumer banking information are examples of this concept (The Economist, 2020).

The policies introduced by the various governments come in response to the use of digital personal data via media and information technology organisations. Accessibility to such data gives media organisations immense power to influence legal decisions and public opinions. It makes them important stakeholders in the policymaking process, increasing their influence over the country’s media consumption. Thus, policies limiting their access become important.

This debate also proves that the media are, in essence, businesses looking to make money and contributing to the growth of a country. Media policies play an important part in safeguarding the interests of these businesses and controlling them to benefit the economy (Freedman, 2008).

Take for example the Hallyu wave in South Korea – the South Korean media and entertainment industry is one of their major ‘exports’ and a major contributor to the country’s overall income. This was made possible due to the government’s interventional policies that worked together with the media production industry to make Hallyu a major Korean export. These policies include lax (as compared to Western counterparts) copyright policies (Parc, et al., 2017), “encouraging corporate investment and vertical integration in the film industry and slowly removing barriers like screen quotas for foreign content” (Gibson, 2020).

South Korea also requires all broadcasting operators to “make contributions to a broadcasting communications development fund” (Bakjiyeon, et al., 2021). Other similar policies include the declaration of a minimum amount of domestic content to be programmed (Bakjiyeon, et al., 2021) and terrestrial broadcasters being prohibited from in-programme advertising (until June 30, 2021) (Yonhap, 2021).

Such policies serve to protect public interest and viewer rights from media businesses and to also foster the domestic media culture industries.

However, it is not necessary that policy emerge from government. The industry itself can also choose to self-regulate in tandem with regulatory authorities (Michalis, 2021). The Press Council of India, formed by the government in 1966, is an example of an independent self-regulating body of the press. Headed by a chairman (usually a retired Supreme Court Justice), along with 28 other members, 20 of whom are members of the Press, it is responsible for the regulation of print media. Similar bodies exist for Broadcast channels, Film and for Advertising (Simran, 2011).

Therefore, media and communications policies emerge from the state’s need to control media industries and assert their sovereignty, from the need for regulating and benefitting from the economic aspects of media and communications businesses, and from the need to safeguard

domestic and public interests. They can also emerge from within the industry alongside the government to provide a stable atmosphere to media.

How is communications policy made?

How policy comes into being is a non-linear political process involving several stakeholders, and varied connotations of power. “Researchers often divide policy into stages, starting from agenda setting and moving through policy formulation, decision-making, and implementation stages” (Michalis, 2021). Policy is made through a series of decisions, largely political, with some influences from non-state actors depending on the amount of power they hold as major stakeholders. It needs to take into account political, social, economical, historical and cultural contexts alongside the market pressures and interests.

Here is where power comes into the picture, policymaking is a process deeply entangled with power – Media policy, according to Des Freedman (2014, p. 69), “is a conflict ridden process in which rival interests struggle in order to shape the dynamics of the media environment.”

Policy comes into being through a series of actions and inactions, or as Freedman (2014, p. 74) calls them, “policy silences.” Policy, at its heart is political – it is influenced by the political ideology that makes up the state. There is also the layer of the vested interests of stakeholders who then try their best to have it formulated to their benefit.

Take for example the debate for net neutrality in India. It was first introduced after ‘consultation papers’ released by major telecommunications organisations in response to Whatsapp announcing that they would be allowing voice calls via the Internet. The consultation papers were aimed at licensing internet companies and killing net neutrality. In response to these papers, citizens groups sent emails to the TRAI. This back and forth continued until net neutrality was cemented in India in 2015 (Soni, 2015).

Thus, policy silences work as a way to promote hegemonic interests by influencing the basic agenda and levying different levels of importance on different stakeholders. Here too, until the people got involved as stakeholders to fight for what they wanted, the state remained silent about the debate and was content to let things run as they were going.

Conclusion

Media and communications technologies are at the centre of modern policymaking processes. It is impossible to fully understand these processes without fully understanding the social, political, cultural and historic contexts that affect their emergence and functioning. Media policy emerges as a result of several needs from those of regulation to stabilisation.

However they may emerge, power always remains central to how policies are made: “the media are not the holders of power, but they constitute by and large the space where power is decided” (Castells, 2010). As a result, how policies are made is a topic that undertakes discursive study into a state's relationship with power, business and other stakeholders. The process is very telling of the state's priorities, influence and ideologies.

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