

UNIVERSITY
ACADEMIC THESIS

COMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRIES AND POLICIES

ASSIGNMENT: MAJOR ESSAY

Topic:

Discuss the ways in which communications policy can help strengthen or limit the potential for communications industries to “preserve a viable public sphere” (Osborne & Lewis 1995: 139).

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Date: 22 April 2004

The roles of the media in preserving a viable public sphere (Osborne & Lewis 1995:139) in the midst of globalisation and convergence have become a growing concern in the balances of the power between public and private sectors (Barr 2000:216-217). The need to protect public interests while maintaining commercial viability requires the government to intervene through policy making in regulating and controlling how the communications industries are to be managed (Cunningham & Turner 2002:12-15).

This paper aims to discuss the ways in which communications policies can help strengthen or limit the potential for communications industries to “preserve a viable public sphere” (Osborne & Lewis 1995:139). It looks at the two contrasting critical and pragmatic approaches to policies, and provides an analysis of policy statements in the communications industries of Singapore. Illustrations of how communications policies are formed and the reasons for the policies will be discussed in the context of economic, political, and socio-cultural requirements (Garnham 1998:210-212). The discussion will focus on areas of media ownership, free speech, and loss of diversity in opinions.

In modern societies, interventions by government to regulate the media are usually seen as legitimate. However, as policies may have “unintended and unanticipated consequences”, there are concerns by the citizens as to the reasons for new policies made, whether it is in the interest of the public sphere or the actors and media owners. As noted by Garnham, media policies can be positive as well as negative, depending on the degree of

government interventions in making the policies. A positive policy is the active intervention of the government in making laws or other regulatory instruments to protect the public sphere. A negative policy is the refusal to intervene in the midst of public pressure and request for intervention, for instance, in prohibiting advertisers to be involved in media programming for reasons of commercial viability (Garnham 1998:210-211).

Take the example of the policy made by the Singapore telecommunications regulatory agency, Infocomm Development Authority (IDA) to facilitate full liberalisation of its telecommunications market to allow rapid entry of foreign competition in Singapore (IDA 2004). The reason given for deregulation is explained as a necessary economic move to embrace opportunities for free trade and creating growth in technological innovation to provide consumers with lower costs, more choices, and higher quality in services (IDA 2004; Herman & McChesney 1997:46).

While this deregulation may be seen as a progressive result of globalisation (Herman & McChesney 1997:46) which may be beneficial for the economy, privatisation also means the shift in the role of the government from serving the 'public interest' to the monitoring of 'structural regulation' to facilitate greater market freedom based on decision-making (Barr 2002:132). The result is opening up of a new 'oligopolistic' market dominated by a handful of firms that often compete quite ferociously (Herman & McChesney 1997:57) in serving their own interest in making profit instead of the public. The move to deregulate also means that the public sector communications

infrastructure planning will be replaced by private sector players giving them the liberty to decide how Singapore's communication networks infrastructure will be like in the future (IDA 2004) and with the infrastructure in place, it will mean the reliance on them for long term (Barr 2002:132).

Deregulation and changes in the communications industry as a result of globalisation have been based on a 'new information order' of market freedom which have strengthened the market rule (Herman and McChesney 1997:50-52). At the international scene, free trade agreements continue to work toward the elimination of all barriers to the market (Herman and McChesney 1997:50-52) and the government of Singapore strongly believes that this will help provide opportunities for its citizens (IDA 2004).

According to a statement by IDA, the pursuit of an open economy brings together pro-business policies and creates a conducive business environment, where today more than six thousand multinational companies have called Singapore home forming partnerships with local and global businesses (IDA 2004).

As can be seen from this argument, communications policies can play a positive role and yet result in a negative consequence such as the over reliance on the private sector for the provision of essential communications (Barr 2002:132). In forming communications policies, the government often use the notion of citizenship for its political reasoning in defending the public sector broadcasting (Osborne & Lewis 1995:139) and in Singapore,

these policies have played a significant role in the articulation of policy statements on the content in the media.

The Code of Practice for television and radio broadcasting in Singapore states that free-to-air broadcasters must “broadcast events of national significance in the manner specified by the MDA” (MDA 2004a). Policy such as this made by the Media Development Authority (MDA) of Singapore is often viewed by citizens as necessary measures for criteria of media content, language, visual depiction, and maintenance of values that are Singaporean (MDA 2004a). In requiring commercial broadcasters to broadcast content across a range of areas, “which are congruent with national objectives [to] uphold racial and religious harmony; observe societal and moral standards; and promote positive family values” (MDA 2004), the broadcast media owners are expected by law to play a participative role in nation building by promoting local culture and a distinctive national identity (*New Straits Times* 2000).

While requirements of national content in broadcasting can positively help to maintain societal harmony, the policy also entails the negative notions of governmental control in constraining media content, which states how the content is to be disseminated – “in the manner specified by the MDA” (MDA 2004a). This statement essentially means that there are systemic constraints on political discourse through the mass media (Osborne & Lewis 1995:140) and information gaps such as these can inhibit the citizens’ rights

of participation in political processes and free speech (Osborne & Lewis 1995:140).

Communication constraints in Singapore can be reflected in the government's pressure on journalistic reporting (The State Department 2004) and the control of broadcast coverage of opposition politicians on television and other media (Borsuk 2001). As an added instrument to exercise the rights to specify how media content should be disseminated, the *Internal Security Act* of Singapore also allows the government to restrict "journalism it deems could cause violence, arouse racial or religious tension, threaten national interests, national security or public order" (IPI 2004). With broad definitions of specific and general laws such as these, the government is able to restrict political opposition, criticism, and defamation (The State Department 2004; Schultz 1998:72-78).

In the case of free speech censorship, the *International Herald Tribune* was sued for defamation judgement of S\$950,000 in 1995 for an article that alleged that the current Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was appointed to his post on account of his father, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew (IPI 2004). Several other defamation suits instituted by the Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong against opposition politicians also led to the award of substantial damages to the plaintiffs for statements made during election campaigns (IPI 2004).

With the pressures from the policies and government intervention, media personnel, journalists, and even opposition politicians are often forced to conform by practising self-censorship (The State Department 2004; Bourdieu 1998:47) or by internalising the values of the imposed constraints and “become conditioned by their occupational environment into conventions of particular institutional uniformity” (Barr 2000:9). The consequence of such repressive culture results in the constraint of free speech, which leads to the lack of diversity of opinions available to the population (Cunningham & Turner 2002:12-13).

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1989) wrote that the lack of diversity of opinions is a result of the change in public sphere in the nineteenth century, which is dominated by a strong expanded state, and a press which represented organised economic interests (cited in Watson & Hill 2000:256). Unlike the public sphere today, capitalists during the 17th century provided an ideal diversity of public opinions where debates and communicative interchange helped promote critical reflection and rational discussion on government policies to an informed public (Watson & Hill 2000:256). According to Habermas, media organisations played a significant part in the public sphere of reasoned discussion, but today it has become a part of the process by which the public sphere is controlled and conditioned into the role of passive citizens and consumers (Watson & Hill 2000:256).

In the face of control over media content and the decline in investigative journalism for the television and the press, the loss of diversity in opinions remains a genuine concern (Cunningham & Turner 2002: 13). News reporting in different media, for example, follows a pattern of similarity in content with common and deliberate omissions of information to provide favourable angles on owners' business dealings when they are under same media owner, (Cunningham & Turner 2002: 13). In Singapore, evidence of loss in diversity is even greater because media ownership has been restricted to local control following the MDA's policy that regulates a forty-nine percent cap on foreign investment in broadcast station (MITA 2004). With the media in Singapore primarily owned by two privatised companies that have close ties with the government (*New Straits Times* 2000), free speech and diversity of opinions have become a rarity in the country.

From the socio-cultural perspective, such control over the media can provide both positive and negative consequences. Following the communications policy on national content on broadcast media, the Code specifies that the media owner must "broadcast content that is aligned with national and social values as well as public taste and interests" (MDA 2004). This means in principle that certain forms of public expression are outside the society's moral norms, and the media for reasons of taste and decency, for libel, for invasion of privacy (Garham 1998:212) can serve the public sphere by play the role of gate keeping.

In a classic case against indecency in media broadcast, Singapore free-to-air television station *MediaCorp TV* was fined S\$10,000 for showing a controversial sex video in its nightly news which featured female Taiwanese politician Chu Mei-feng (IPI 2004). The control of televised content in this case may be seen as positive measures taken to protect and maintain public tastes and interest.

In addition to “public taste and interest” (MDA 2004), however, the code’s guidelines also say that, “TV programme standards will have to vary according to the time of the telecast and the target viewership” (MDA 2004). This means that while TV programming and scheduling are planned in the interest of the public sphere, broadcasters to some extent still possess certain rights under the reasons of maintaining commercial viability in sustaining their source of revenue (MDA 2004b). To this end, MDA’s role is to specify the maximum number of minutes per hour of airtime that broadcasters can sell to advertisers (MDA 2004b) following the “family viewing policy which states that programmes broadcast between the family viewing hours of 6am to 10pm should be suitable for family-viewing, including viewing by children” (MDA 2004b).

While these stringent regulations may be deemed as a measure to protect citizens, and thus serving the interest of the public sphere, the balancing of commercial viability and the influence of media owners over broadcast programming schedules remains a core concern (Cunningham & Turner 2002:12-14). Proponents of media commercialisation suggest that

advertising should be seen in the light of a cultural industry that gives the people what they want based on media performance ratings, which 'measures' public interest of a democratic society (Sinclair 2002:200; Bourdieu 1998:49-59, 66-67; Cunningham & Turner 2002:12). Ratings may be manipulated to reflect higher ratings demographics through advertising control over the content and schedules programming, by influencing the audiences to purchase the kind of products being advertised (Sinclair 2002:201-202).

In a move to restrain advertisers' involvement in programming and promotional time, MDA has also imposed a sponsorship code that spells out areas that broadcasters should not be influenced by the sponsor or either content or acquisition of a programme (MDA 2004b). These areas include social responsibility, editorial integrity and programming independence (MDA 2004b). In essence, this mean that "broadcasters must make sure that no undue prominence is given to a sponsor and that references to the sponsor should not mar the audience's viewing" (MDA 2004b).

Policies that restrict how advertising is run faces expected criticism by the media industry (Keane 1994:55). Market liberals argue that the media should simultaneously provide two services: programmes to audiences, and audiences to advertisers (Keane 1994:55). Proponents of free control over the media suggest that broadcasters should transmit programmes that have wide appeal catering for all tastes (Keane 1994:54-55) in order for individual consumers to decide what they really want (Keane 1994:53). In

Singapore, however, the local media is expected to play a unique role in the building of a multiracial and multi-religious nation (MITA 2004), where foreign ownership of broadcasting station is regulated with a forty-nine percent cap (MITA 2004). This restriction indicates the tight control of the media industry in Singapore which may be for the public good or a way to block citizens from information that provides diversity of opinions.

Notwithstanding concerns over advertisers' control on programmes and scheduling, however, it will be reasonable to agree that public service programmes such as those providing cultural content, may not necessarily bring in the revenue required to sustain commercial viability (MDA 2004b). In order to maintain core national values and a viable public sphere in Singapore, the MDA has imposed television and radio licences fee on consumers to provide funding for public service programmes (MDA 2004c). This step may be seen as an acceptable necessity for protecting the public interest or to maintain the viability of public service broadcasting in a highly commercialised environment.

As can be seen from the discussion in this paper, the primary purpose of communications policies is often explained as a measure necessary in preserving a viable public sphere (Osborne & Lewis 1995:139). However, the impact of these policies often yields unintended and unanticipated consequences (Barr 2002:132). With the change in international laws and globalisation, Singapore has taken the step of deregulating its telecommunications industry to invite foreign competition which eventually

may result in over reliance on the private sector to provide services which are no longer controlled by the government (IDA 2004). The control over media output while offering national and social values, public tastes and interest, can also be a way that blocks out information which may be unfavourable to the ruling authorities, and this in turn may become constraints for diversity of opinions and free speech (Cunningham & Turner 2002:12-13). The competition between providing what audiences want and the influence of advertisers providing commercial viability of the business will remain a continuing challenge in which intervention by policy makers will still be necessary in the midst of globalisation and convergence (Barr 2000:216-217).

(2,461 words)

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