

MAKING MEDIA POLICY: LOOKING FORWARD, LOOKING BACK

Abstract

Seeking papers for the media stream at the conference and articles for this issue of Media International Australia, our aim was to examine contemporary media policy issues that benefited from some kind of historical analysis. Rather than starting with history, confident that it served up powerful and useful lessons, the idea was to begin with the current policy challenges and see whether history helped. Unsurprisingly, most authors found it did — though not always, and for different reasons.

Policy-makers are looking everywhere they can for advice right now. In front of them, they are trying to understand a future without Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch or Bear Stearns, but where the United States' biggest insurer is controlled by government. Behind them, they are searching for records — the biggest one-day falls on stock markets, the biggest two-day rises, the most expensive bail-outs — and finding they have to go back a long way for those that are still standing. Then they are looking around at the present, trying to decide what to do, sometimes changing their minds within moments as the present disowns even the very recent past.

Early in 2007, the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University advertised a conference, *Governing by Looking Back — How History Matters in Society, Politics and Government*. Kevin Rudd had just become federal opposition leader. One of the main ways he was distinguishing himself from the incumbent prime minister, John Howard, was by concentrating on *The Future*. At a press conference later in the year, after Howard announced the election date, Rudd said 'future' 24 times, eight of them in his first 200 words (Rudd, 2007). When the ANU conference eventually happened, the Labor leader had been prime minister for three weeks. He was *The Future*.

Governing By Looking Back, in December 2007, seemed a decidedly unfashionable way to spend three days. It was what the election's losers had been thumped for doing. The last time the government had changed in Australia, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington were five years off. There had been no Asian economic crisis. The World Trade Organization had recently opened its doors in Geneva, a fully fledged global trade liberalising body founded on the assumption that globalisation and liberal markets were here to stay. The

internet had just been discovered; DVD players were virtually unknown; even the young still bought CDs. What good could come of looking back even this far, let alone further — especially in an area like media, where the speed of change is a cliché? The conference organizers argued:

Much of the rhetoric in politics and government is about shaping the future. Yet their day-to-day realities are pervaded by coping with the past. The past impinges on political life in many different respects. Many political regimes are founded on historical compromises between rival social forces. Others are built on histories of conflict, conquest and oppression which have a way of returning to the present in the form of unresolved traumas and ‘forgotten pasts’. More generally, political agendas are often dominated by long-standing social problems rather than by novel ones. Incumbent office-holders are constrained by the commitments entered into by their predecessors. Much of their energy goes to dealing with the unintended outcomes and public controversies generated by past government policies. This is reinforced by the ever-expanding range of accountability mechanisms that surround centers of public power today, who critically scrutinize their past performance ...

Paul ’t Hart, one of the organisers, had co-written an article exploring the role of historical analogies in managing two political crises in Austria and Sweden (Brändström et al., 2004). These writers found that analogies could act as filters, teachers, prisons, blind-spots, weapons and traumas. They could provide a script that decision-makers presumed contemporary events were following, a set of formal policy guidelines or operating procedures for dealing with crisis, a ‘quasi-monopolistic frame that prematurely narrows sense-making and political space’. Analogous circumstances could be forgotten as well as remembered, even ones more pertinent than those most popular with policy-makers and the public. Historical analogies could be invoked ‘to sell policies rather than to discover them’, especially by touching ‘raw nerves’. In summary, the past offered as many traps as treasures for the contemporary policy-maker. Productive learning from history was not easy.

Seeking papers for the media stream at the conference and articles for this issue of *Media International Australia*, our aim was to examine contemporary media policy issues that benefited from some kind of historical analysis. Rather than starting with history, confident that it served up powerful and useful lessons, the idea was to begin with the current policy challenges and see whether history helped. Unsurprisingly, most authors found it did — though not always, and for different reasons.

Sometimes history revealed why things are as they are. In media policy, that can include organisations, physical infrastructure, spectrum allocations, laws, market structures, and social and cultural practices. These survive beyond the circumstances of their birth, and shape choices well into the future. They make some options possible or impossible, easier or harder, cheaper or more expensive. Sometimes history revealed durable factors that can be relied upon to get the attention of

policy-makers in the future, like the geographic coverage of communications services, the degree of competition in markets and the scale of production and distribution opportunities for the programs we call documentary — ‘the creative treatment of actuality’, in John Grierson’s famous formulation. But history also revealed hidden factors that consistently fail to get the attention they deserve. Technology garners attention, but in policy as in history (see Edgerton, 2006), the spectacular public technologies of distribution — the overland telegraph line, international wireless telegraphy, mobile telephony, digital TV — get much more attention than the domestic technologies of reception and reorganisation — the cordless phone, the video cassette recorder, the remote control, the jumble of jacks and leads at the backs of TV sets.

The contributions to this issue are organised in a loose chronology, from the youngest to the oldest history investigated by the authors in their analyses of contemporary policy. Ellie Rennie and Daniel Featherstone are interested in the future of Indigenous broadcasting in remote communities. Satellite and terrestrial infrastructure built and used for that purpose until 2007 has been redeployed recently for a new National Indigenous Television Service, NITV, now also carried on pay TV services and, from late October 2008, digital free-to-air TV in Sydney. That redeployment made history of the Indigenous Community Television Service (ICTV), developed over many years to distribute the video material produced in remote communities. A functioning service became an ‘alternate model’. This complex system, based on local control, regional networking and cross-platform production, was transmitting around 300 hours a year of original content by 2005, the year the Howard government allocated nearly \$50 million over four years to the new NITV. Understanding how an ‘old-fashioned public service broadcasting model’ was endorsed ‘at a time when grassroots, user-generated media was on the ascendant across the media at large’ is essential if the authors are to imagine how both NITV and ICTV might act in the future.

Georgie McClean explores the future of another institution, SBS, created nearly 30 years ago. She groups it with two other public broadcasters established around the same time, Channel 4 in the United Kingdom and Nederlandse Programma Stichting (NPS) in The Netherlands. Each was developed in a country that already had a public broadcaster, as a policy response to the changing nature of the society it was intended to reflect. Each was required to present multicultural programs. Asking what to do in the future is a persistent question, answered differently in changing circumstances. McClean argues that these younger public broadcasters — especially SBS, still dedicated to multiculturalism but now with ‘national reach and ambition’ — might be better positioned for ‘an increasingly plural and globalised society requiring new levels of cultural and linguistic competence’ than older institutions carrying ‘a heritage that makes realignment to contemporary audiences more difficult’.

Gerard Goggin’s analysis of decisions about the technologies, market structures and geographic coverage of mobile phone networks in Australia from the late 1980s notes the decline in formal public discussion about mobile technology choices, from the extensive AUSTEL inquiries and reports about 2G technologies in the

early 1990s to the choices of 3G made by private carriers, and the shutdown of Telstra's CDMA network in the 2000s. Even in the more comprehensive public assessments of future options, however, he laments 'the paucity of the imagining of users and uses of technology'. This lack of imagination provided a poor guide to futures that are now past. Many 'burning issues of contemporary policy', like mobiles-as-media and ubiquitous access to fast broadband, 'are not prefigured at all'.

Goggin's case study of public access cordless telephony links neatly to Julian Thomas's exploration of the domestic technologies of television. Public access cordless telephony was given serious communications policy attention in the early 1990s. The technology was eclipsed by mobiles in the markets that mattered to policy, but cordless nevertheless achieved great success in the less-regulated domestic space of households. This is also the site of infra-red remote controls, games consoles, Laserdisc and Selectadisc players, programmable VCRs, and the early home computers of the 1970s and 1980s that Thomas argues 'dramatically enlarged the possibilities of television, well before what we now think of as the era of digital communications'. Largely unplanned and uncoordinated, 'not part of any communications policy', Thomas finds in this era histories that illuminate some of the underlying problems of television's looming digital switchover. He examines two challenges — energy management and access to program information — which could benefit from 'bringing back home' the study of digital television.

Pat Laughren captures the moment in mid-2008 when Screen Australia was formed by merging three existing federal government organisations. The oldest, Film Australia, had been around in various forms for nearly a century. Wanting to ensure documentary has a firm place on Australian screens in the future, Laughren makes a long-standing demand of this new institution. Citing Erik Barnouw, he says the documentary form has not been a stable object, but 'an evolving set of coexisting practices constantly reworked in light of new production and distribution technologies'. There is, however, 'a consensus that documentaries strive to capture the experiences of real people and to represent them truthfully and accessibly'. Laughren's historical analysis, 'at the least ... suggests it may be worth pondering whether there is still currency in the tensions between artistry and efficiency, propaganda and analysis, gate keeping and access, institution and independence, or cinema and television', tensions that have been central to the debates about public support for documentary.

Several contributors are interested in the National Broadband Network, bids for which will close about the time this issue of *Media International Australia* is published. The Australian government is contributing up to \$4.7 billion to this project as debt or equity. An open access fibre-to-the-node or fibre-to-the-premises network is to be built, offering minimum download speeds of 12 megabits/second to 98 per cent of Australian homes and businesses within five years. My own article finds striking similarities between the political and industrial origins of this project and the creation of a public-private partnership in the 1920s to establish direct wireless telegraph services between Australia and Britain and North America. Successful by most measures, but permanently fraught, the experience

with this joint enterprise provides many clues that might assist the structuring of the broadband partnership.

Trevor Barr finds wanting the policy model for telecommunications investment in Australia since 1997 — open competition and the privatisation of Telstra. He identifies a consistent element in three older, more successful examples of communications policy: Australia's overland telegraph line, NASA's development of communications satellites and various US government agencies' early work on what became the internet. All demonstrate the public sector's 'great track record in building valuable telecommunications infrastructure'. By comparison, he argues liberalisation and privatisation 'have actually made us less efficient in investment and impeded the development of the broadband networks we need'.

Peter Putnis also examines the overland telegraph line, but draws different lessons. The state's role, he argues, was ambiguous. International telegraphy promised widespread benefits, but the actual service was expensive, exclusive and unreliable. The route, through Australia's remote centre, was a product of colonial one-upmanship rather than engineering or business efficiency. Putnis is especially interested in how governments came to prefer a private monopoly over competition, and how a weak bargaining position meant adequate services could be secured for the community only by providing a large subsidy to the private telegraph company that monopolised the service. These are very live precedents for governments planning big investments in broadband infrastructure.

Many other topics could have been covered in a journal issue about the relevance of history to contemporary media policy. Two big themes emerge from those we have gathered. History matters to media policy because the big policy decisions are so often about institutions or infrastructure. The decisions about institutions concern what existing publicly owned, funded or regulated organisations should do in the future, especially broadcasters, formerly state-owned telecommunications companies, and film and arts funding agencies. These organisations have legislation, charters, staff, buildings and program schedules that are products of history. The decisions about infrastructure encompass what should be built, who should build it and on what terms. While they are always expressed to be about new infrastructure, they are almost always about additions to existing networks, or replacements for parts of them. The new networks have to connect with the old, run their cables through the same ducts or hang them from the same poles, occupy the same frequencies or others nearby where interference may result, and take their customers. Enabling the new requires negotiation with the old.

Whether the big media policy decisions in the future should so often be about the organisations and infrastructure that have dominated the past — about supply rather than demand — is itself a big question. The policy obsession with new networks often ignores or adopts simplistic assumptions about how they will be used and how much they will cost consumers, as opposed to the network builders. For Julian Thomas, the problem with digital television policy, for example, is not the lack of a sense of history. It is that a particular kind of history distorts or masks the nature and scale of the policy challenges ahead. The transition to digital is conceived and planned as a 'singular systemic change', when what

might actually be underway are ‘digital transitions in the plural ... a number of somewhat haphazard and not necessarily closely related adaptations and innovations, appearing over several decades’.

E.H. Carr suspected that: ‘Good historians ... whether they think about it or not, have the future in their bones.’ (Carr, 1990: 108) Good media policy futurists have histories in their bones, but they need to think hard about which ones.

References

- Brändström, Annika, Bynander, Fredrik and 't Hart, Paul 2004, ‘Governing by Looking Back: Historical Analogies and Crisis Management’, *Public Administration*, vol. 82, no. 1, pp. 191–210.
- Carr, E.H. 1990 [1961], *What is History?* 2nd ed., Penguin, London.
- Edgerton, David 2006, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History Since 1900*, Profile Books, London.
- Rudd, Kevin 2007, ‘Text of Opposition Leader’s Speech after Prime Minister John Howard Announced a November 24 Election’, Australian Associated Press, 14 October.

Jock Given is Professor of Media and Communications at Swinburne University’s Institute for Social Research.