

Up, Up & Away in my Beautiful Balloon...: some questions of media policy

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At the end of August 2005, Communications Minister Helen Coonan used an address to the National Press Club in Canberra to float her ideas about changing media law in Australia. They were conveyed to the people by the press and the broadcast media. Whether these ideas amount to a media policy, whether they are truly democratic and whether she was launching a fully-blown balloon or just flying kites, remain to be seen. As does the public's response.

The Australian, the following day (1 Sept 2005), headlined its report "Coonan urges industry to adopt reform agenda". There was no sign of any appeal to the public or any question of what kind of media system might best serve their interests, the long history of claims in licence applications notwithstanding. Nor was there much about the pros and cons of either state control of the media or media control of the state.

More than a decade ago, Paul Keating seized both the news agenda and the policy initiative with the beguilingly simple proposition that media owners must choose to be either 'princes of print or queens of the screen'. The Commonwealth can licence radio and television broadcasters but has no direct constitutional power over the print media—newspapers and magazines. The Broadcasting Services Act (1992) only invokes them indirectly. Under its 'cross-media rules', owning print media becomes an obstacle to owning and operating radio and television in the same market. It also excludes foreign

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ownership. Just as Rupert Murdoch, in the 1980s, had to become an American to buy a television station there, so foreigners supposedly have to become Australians to buy television stations here.

In their 1969 report to the Gorton Government, Phillip Adams, Peter Coleman and Barry Jones had cleverly argued both ends against the middle: on the one hand, that Australia had a rich and wondrous culture that deserved to be celebrated on its film and television screens, and on the other, that Australians would never know who and what they were—or what they stood for—unless they could see and explore that identity for themselves. Either way, local control of the media and their content was vital. Somehow, the Canadian Izzie Asper and his CanWest Corporation drove over or around or through that roadblock to buy the Ten Network.

Coonan, likewise observing the KISS (keep it simple...) principle of politics, stood on only three planks: to ‘liberalise cross-media and foreign ownership laws... and embrace new ways of doing business’. These, she apparently believes, provide the necessary and sufficient conditions to ‘significantly benefit consumers’. Citizens, it seems, are to be judged as consumers who not only shop to live but live to shop.

The Minister’s simple faith appears to rely on her belief that ‘*the forces of change* (as she described changes in technology) are unstoppable’. She acknowledges that they ‘challenge some business models’ but (making the best of the inevitable) insists that they will be beneficial. How and for whom, remain problematic. As does the question of whether the verb ‘to govern’ means ‘to serve’ or ‘to control’.

This is why the Federal government’s current proposals for a new media ownership regime in Australia are so disappointingly timid. They might promise foreign and cross-media ownership but they fail to provide a free market for the ownership and delivery of media services. They beg the question of cultural identity—whatever that might mean—and they continue to protect the small cabal of established media owners.

Looking back through the thickets of recent technology and emerging services, where people have a whole media system in their pockets with their mobile phones, it is hard to imagine the old world at the end of the nineteenth century, when the newspaper and the cinema became the first forms of mass media.

Worldwide, the human race was a largely rural species and very few of them could read. Marvellous Melbourne might well, in the wake of the gold-rush, have been the second city in the vast British Empire, but Australians knew that people lived in either Sydney or the bush, and most did the latter. To make life more pleasantly liveable, they aspired to three services in their homes: taps, toilets and telephones.

The immigrants, who struggled around the world to join them, came to share their dream. In the dark depths of Depression, in 1932, Australia demanded that government establish the ABC, not least to explore and celebrate their identity. And their needs persist. Just recall the way in which Whitlam rode to power in Australia 30 years ago on his promise to sewer our cities' sprawling suburbs, and observe today's touchiness about the reliability of water supplies and phone lines.

Globally today, the human race lives largely in cities. Only half of its people can read and thus prefer to watch and listen to whatever will inform, educate or entertain them, persuade them to form communities or make sense of what the world is all about.

Journalism is no longer just the daily reporting of events and issues for the press. It has even outgrown the cinema newsreel that once filled the first half of a picture show. Technological convergence now makes it a staple of radio, television and on-line Internet services. We can 'read the paper' (as it were) on our computer screens and keep track of reports and discussions of the news from all over the world – without producing more rubbish to go out with the garbage.

At the same time, newspapers have diversified to cover a multitude of cultural functions. They are sectioned to carry news, opinion and features, and to incorporate all sorts of specialist magazines and supplements.

Films, meanwhile, have evolved from ‘magic lantern’ shows, through reels of acetate and celluloid, to videotape and now DVDs or on-line services. Feature films were once 90-minute fictional narratives; documentaries were generally shorter but no less creative. They too had to woo and win our attention, and their stories had (in fact) to have happened. The Melbourne Film Festival, this year, introduced a competition for 90-second films – not only to be watched but also made on mobile phones.

We are all too familiar with listening to radio programs while we wait to be put through to busy extensions on automatic telephone switchboards. We are used to radio that only demands our attention between one traffic light and next risk of a collision. We can also listen to radio from afar as streaming audio on a computer.

The technology thus reduces television to its fundamental form as a stream of moving pictures and synchronous sound on an electronic screen. The distinctions between terrestrial and satellite broadcasting, cable delivery and on-line to a computer display screen become trivial. As do where the sound and pictures come from. What matters is whether they are worth watching and listening to.

We already have bloggers pumping out their views of the world as words on the Internet. Current furores over popular music go to show that quality is crucial, and also that we need to work out how best to reward those who produce goods and services for the media. We need equally to see one another’s pictures. The crunch issues, however, remain. Why should freedom of expression be a privilege restricted to only four or five ‘voices’ in each centre in Australia? And why should that privilege carry with it a licence to the few to print money – as Lord Northcliffe so gleefully put it? For more than sixty years we have paid lip service to the four freedoms that Western leaders supposedly thought worth fighting World War 2 for, and enshrining in the United Nations: freedom

of belief and expression, freedom of association, freedom from want and freedom from fear.

Research internationally indicates that people are driven by a desire for quality in what they read, hear and see, rather than strong communal or national affiliations, and available technology teases them with the prospect of what they want. That might be all that is at stake in our search for a proper media policy in modern, multicultural Australia.