Diversity and pluralism in contemporary communication policies: everywhere and yet nowhere

Introduction

Contemporary media and communications policies currently being drawn up to confront the challenges of convergence and globalisation are littered with positive references to diversity and pluralism. These twin objectives – concerned with fostering a wide range of voices in the public sphere - are key justifications for the re-writing of rules affecting the media industries at the start of the 21st century. There are, for example, 35 mentions of pluralism and 42 of diversity in the British government’s communications white paper (DTI/DCMS 2000) that underpinned the 2003 Communications Act; there are 67 mentions of pluralism and 24 of diversity in its consultation on media ownership rules (DTI/DCMS 2001); and there are an impressive 599 references to diversity in the US Federal Communications Commission’s review on broadcast ownership rules (FCC 2003a) that recommended raising the national television ownership cap from 35 per cent to 45 per cent of the total audience.

These references to diversity and pluralism feature in policy documents that are highly deregulatory and liberalising in character, relaxing media ownership restrictions and increasing the relevance of competition legislation to the media industries. Indeed some of the strongest supporters of market liberalisation insist that they are motivated by the desire to increase diversity. FCC chairman Michael Powell introduced the broadcast ownership review by claiming that the revised rules would ‘promote and protect diversity, competition and localism in the 21st Century broadcast media marketplace’ (FCC 2003b). The Italian minister for communications, Maurizio Gasparri, has described the controversial bill that would consolidate prime minister Berlusconi’s control of Italian television as a law that ‘provides for greater plurality’ (Ministry of Communications 2004). Rupert Murdoch himself claims that his News Corporation empire plays a key role in fostering diversity arguing that ‘we are a relatively small part of an ever-widening rainbow of outlets for the dissemination of diverse views. The media sector is
experiencing an historic growth spurt. Pluralism and diversity are growing *organically* under our very noses while we agonize about their shrinkage’ (Murdoch 1998).

This is all highly confusing. Policies designed to maximise pluralism and diversity have traditionally been introduced specifically because of the perceived inability of market forces to express a wide range of voices to a wide range of audiences. Now it appears that market forces are seen as not only *not* inimical to diversity and pluralism but also as potential guarantors of such aspirations. This involves a process of re-defining media diversity and pluralism as twin outcomes of strategies designed to maximise consumer choice and market competition. This paper seeks to evaluate the uses of diversity and pluralism that saturate contemporary communications policies and proposes a definition of media diversity that adds a new focus on *disagreement* to the existing focus on *choice* and *difference*.

**Defining and promoting media diversity and pluralism**

According to an influential commentator on British media policy, ‘[n]otions of pluralism, diversity and the marketplace for ideas are at best vague and malleable, at worst adjusted to the purpose of whoever invokes them’ (Tambini 2001: 26). For this reason alone, it is worth attempting to untangle them so that we may more effectively confront the policy regimes in which they are heavily implicated.

Diversity and pluralism are frequently used either consecutively or interchangeably in many discussions of media performance and policy. One concise definition (pertaining to both) argues that:

Pluralism is generally associated with diversity in the media; the presence of a number of different and independent voices, and of different political opinions and representations of culture within the media. Citizens expect and need a diversity and plurality of media content and media sources. (Doyle 2002: 11/12)
This highlights the key issues – of the democratic requirement for contrasting sources, ideas, forms and images present in the media environment – but does little to clarify the distinction between the two terms. The confusion is not helped by the fact that US media policy debates generally focus on diversity while European ones coalesce around the objective of pluralism.

In the USA, media diversity refers to two interconnected phenomena. The first relates, broadly speaking, to the participation by and representation of ethnic minorities in the creative process and is part of a larger debates concerning cultural diversity. The second is based on the classic liberal paradigm of media freedom in which a democratic society sustains a ‘marketplace of ideas’. Philip Napoli (1999b) argues that this metaphor has its origins in both liberal economic and democratic theory and therefore has competition-based as well as public good objectives. It is best summarised in terms of First Amendment freedoms and, in the words of a Supreme Court judge, ‘rests on the assumption that the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public’ (quoted in Napoli 1999b: 153/4). Media diversity is therefore a key determinant of a vigorous ‘marketplace of ideas’ through which the First Amendment is expressed and cemented and actively promoted by specific policy instruments. All major broadcast regulatory innovations, such as the Prime Time Access Rule and Fin-Syn rules (diminishing the power of the networks and promoting local and non-network programmes), the Fairness Doctrine (requiring opposing views to be aired) and broadcast ownership restrictions have been carried out under the aegis of the ‘marketplace of ideas’ metaphor and in order to promote media diversity.

Napoli (1999a) and, following him, the FCC (2003a) break down diversity into separate elements. Napoli (1999a: 8) talks of source diversity, content diversity and exposure diversity (the extent to which audiences are actually exposed to the first two variables) while the FCC (2003a: 8-18) identifies five different types of diversity: viewpoint, outlet, programme, source, and minority and female ownership. Although the FCC concentrates largely on protecting viewpoint diversity, taken together, these definitions of diversity
refer to media content that expresses a variety of perspectives, that embodies different
genres, and that is produced by a range of different producers in a market that is both
competitive and inclusive of different cultural and gender backgrounds.

Underpinning this definition of diversity is the notion of variety, of a smorgasbord of
companies, formats, opinions, styles, niches and narratives from which audiences are free
to pick and choose. Diversity here refers not so much to what distinguishes one choice
from another but to the size of the menu as a whole. It is a highly consumerist
construction that privileges the act of individual selection far more than the social
obligation to provide choices that are fundamentally in opposition to each other – or, in
the words of the Supreme Court judge quoted earlier, viewpoints that are ‘antagonistic’.
While some regulation may be necessary, particularly in curbing anti-competitive
ownership of multiple media outlets, diversity is best catered to by matching consumer
appetites to the instincts of the market.

In Europe, media pluralism (rather than diversity) has become a more prevalent policy
objective but there has also been more attention aimed at highlighting the differences
between the two. Pluralism gained currency in policy debates in Britain in the late 1970s
(Freedman 2003: 101; Gibbons 2000: 307), a response both to the emergence of more
mixed, multicultural populations as well as to increasing levels of dissatisfaction with the
existing media structures. For example, the 1977 Annan Committee on the future of
broadcasting articulated real concerns about the ideological narrowness of the
broadcasting ‘duopoly’ and argued that contemporary culture ‘is now multi-racial and
pluralist…[t]he structure of broadcasting must reflect this variety’ (Annan 1977: 30).
This laid the basis for a ‘pluralist’ approach that sought to open up broadcasting to new
and previously marginalized voices but also laid the basis for a more decentred view of
broadcasting as catering to different parts of the community by increasing choice and
competition – very much related to the definition of diversity discussed above.

This connected with the deregulatory and liberalising initiatives of the 1980s and 1990s
where it was argued that market mechanisms together with the introduction of the new
technologies of cable and satellite would expand the choices available to all audiences. Media policy was designed to facilitate the entrance of new players and outlets to media markets and that this could only be a significant boost to media pluralism. According to Thomas Gibbons, however, ‘media pluralism was not promoted for the purpose of supporting a more democratic role for the media, as might be supposed from its content. Instead, the idea was adopted as a transitional concept that conveniently assisted a shift from public service dominance to a market approach’ (Gibbons, 2000: 307).

This new emphasis on pluralism led to a clarification of the differences between pluralism and diversity and the distinctive policy responses required by each. This was an approach in the mid-1990s closely identified with the future ‘New Labour’ government of Tony Blair whose political philosophy consisted of a ‘third way’, a combination of a commitment to neo-liberal market disciplines and more traditional social democratic, welfare objectives. The IPPR think thank, closely associated with New Labour, published the results of its investigations into the changing media in the book, *New Media, New Policies* (Collins and Murroni 1996). In the chapter on concentration of ownership, the authors distinguish between ‘plurality of sources and diversity of content’ (ibid.: 58) and claim that competition legislation, in conjunction with other regulatory instruments, is necessary to deliver plural ownership structures and a ‘democratic marketplace for ideas’ (ibid.: 63). However, even though the authors argue that there is no straightforward or predictable connection between pluralism (of outlets and of ownership) and diversity (of content), their emphasis is very much on developing quantitative measures (around market share, for example) designed to produce pluralistic ownership structures in the hope that diverse content and voices will flow from this.

The incoming New Labour government adopted this approach and further specified the difference between pluralism and diversity in the communications white paper (DTI/DCMS 2000: 35) and especially in its consultation on media ownership rules (DTI/DCMS 2001: 6-8). The latter argues succinctly that

Diversity refers to the variety of different programmes, publications and services that are available, whereas plurality is about the choice people can make between
different providers of those services. Both are key to the quality of service and the range of news and opinion we as citizens receive from the media. They are, however, delivered by different means. (DTI/DCMS 2001: 6)

The traditional mechanism for ensuring media diversity is through positive content regulation, for example public service broadcasting, independent production or local content quotas, subsidies and statutory programming requirements. Pluralism (or viewpoint diversity to use the US phrase), on the other hand, is delivered through competition legislation backed up by media-specific ownership restrictions that are designed to curb bottlenecks and excesses of power, to maintain entry to media markets and to encourage competition within these markets. This form of ‘external pluralism’ complements the ‘internal pluralism’ sought by public service broadcasters who are required to offer different services and programmes aimed at different audiences.

While this is a helpful step forward in distinguishing between plurality (of sources) and diversity (of content), the underlying principles separating them are perhaps less distinctive. Both objectives are now defined along familiar contours of variety and choice and both are to be realized through a combination of market forces and regulatory intervention. For example, according to the section on ‘maintaining diversity and plurality’ in the UK’s communications white paper, convergence has inspired companies to increase content production across a range of platforms – market forces, it argues, are already ‘delivering a large element of the diverse services which our society requires’ (DTI/DCMS 2000: 35). We are therefore left with a situation in which the discourse of pluralism and diversity is extraordinarily common in British media policymaking, eloquently defined, clearly distinguished, although increasingly conceptualised in terms of efficiency, consumer satisfaction and customer choice. Philip Napoli notes a similar ‘shift in orientation’ in the USA from looking at diversity as a public good towards one which is a ‘tangible and empirically assessable construct’ (Napoli 1999a: 8), an illustration of the contemporary neo-liberal interpretation of the ‘marketplace of ideas’ metaphor (Napoli 1999b).
Pluralism and diversity in media policy today

A commitment to media pluralism and cultural diversity is now at the heart of a future European constitution. Article II-11 on freedom of expression and information states that the ‘freedom and pluralism of the media shall be respected’ while Article III-181 promises that the European Union will ‘contribute to the flowering of the culture of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity’ (EC 2003a). Such is its respect for national differences that the Commission, in its green paper on services of general interest, admits that, despite its desire to secure media pluralism throughout the media in Europe, ‘the protection of media pluralism is primarily a task for the Member States’ (EC 2003b: 22). In the USA, diversity is one of the three policy goals (together with competition and localism) guiding regulators’ attitudes towards media ownership (see FCC 2003a: 8).

In this situation, let us consider two countries’ approaches to securing pluralism and diversity in contemporary media systems, firstly via recent legislation in the UK and secondly via the FCC’s 2003 review of broadcast ownership rules. Both case studies make it clear that the traditional justifications for seeking to foster and protect a range of voices in the media – that spectrum scarcity made regulation desirable and necessary – are no longer applicable. According to FCC chairman Michael Powell, the contemporary media environment is defined by its ‘abundance’ which

means more programming, more choice and more control in the hands of citizens. At any given moment, our citizens have access to scores of TV networks devoted movies, dramatic series, sports, news and educational programming, both for adults and children. In short, niche programming to satisfy almost any of our citizens’ diverse tastes. (Powell 2003: 4)

This is similar to the language used by British trade and culture officials, that we live in a ‘communications cornucopia’ featuring ‘dramatically increased quantities of images, information and data available to us from all over the world through a widening array of everyday devices and networks’ (DTI/DCMS 2000: 7). The consequence is that diversity,
while an objective to be protected and expanded, is already with us thanks to the vigour of market forces and the deployment of new technologies; it is virtually guaranteed because of the perceived pluralism of the modern media landscape.

This conception of diversity – of a plethora of outlets, services and audiences – is used in the British white paper far more than a definition that highlights the publicising of contrasting and ‘antagonistic’ ideas. This leads to a real confusion as to how diversity is to be delivered. The government makes it quite clear that diversity (as opposed to plurality) has traditionally been maintained by content regulation: ‘In the Communications White Paper, we set out our commitment to public service broadcasting and positive content regulation, which we believe will deliver diversity in the new competitive environment’ (DTI/DCMS 2001: 6 – emphasis added). Yet in that white paper, the section on public service broadcasting contains only three very slight references to diversity while there are 22 mentions of diversity in the section on ‘maintaining diversity and plurality’ which is largely concerned with the need to reform existing ownership rules. Furthermore, the government’s actual (rather than rhetorical) support for an independent and critical public service broadcaster able to pursue diverse programming is open to question after its furious attack on the BBC as a whole following the dispute over the Corporation’s coverage of government claims about weapons of mass destruction (see Robinson 2003).

The government believes there is still a need to limit multiple and cross-media ownership but promises that ‘we will be as deregulatory as possible, in the knowledge that new competition legislation should be more effective in preventing companies from abusing a dominant market position’ (DTI/DCMS 2001.: 11). This has been dramatically illustrated in recent legislation allowing for foreign ownership of terrestrial television channels, the possibility of a single ITV and an ambiguous ‘plurality test’ in the case of large newspaper mergers ultimately sanctioned by the trade and industry secretary. The implication is that diversity is, above all, to be fostered through pluralistic, competitive market arrangements.
There are exceptions to this. Diversity is also to be sought through the continuing use of quotas for independent production, through a commitment to regional broadcasting and through exploring the possibilities for increased community broadcasting. There are, however, serious concerns about the ability of any of these developments to challenge the pro-competition understanding of diversity that is increasingly hegemonic. Firstly, the independent production sector is subject to higher levels of commercial pressure than the large public service broadcasters and was developed in the UK in the 1980s precisely to stimulate market forces inside broadcasting (see Freedman 2003: 133). The government has recently introduced rules that allow independent companies to keep control of copyright in international sales in an attempt, not to promote diversity, but to build up the profitability and competitiveness of British television in general. Secondly, the government’s commitment to regional broadcasting can be questioned by its sanctioning of mergers in the ITV sector that allow for the possibility of a single, centralized ITV system that would certainly undermine regional diversity. Finally, its support for community broadcasting in the shape of highly localised restricted service licences (RSLs) in both television and radio would be a welcome boost for non-commercial voices and structures but forms a marginal part of its overall broadcasting policy.

The FCC’s 20-month review of media ownership regulation culminated in a decision in June 2003 to loosen ownership rules and sanction further cross-media ownership. The new rules allow newspapers to own television and radio stations in the same city and increase the share of the national audience that a television network may reach from 35 per cent to 45 per cent. This degree of liberalisation was proposed despite the FCC’s acknowledgment that viewpoint diversity, the desired policy objective, ‘is fostered when there are multiple independently owned media outlets’ (FCC 2003c: 4).¹

A key way in which the FCC sought to manage the contradiction between increased diversity and reduced ownership controls is through its highly empirical understanding of diversity. The rules designed to maximise viewpoint diversity were based on a

¹ The rules have since been challenged and have yet to be implemented. See Robert McChesney (2004) for a full analysis of the evolution of and mobilization against the FCC’s review.
quantitative method of measuring diversity, a ‘Diversity Index’ (DI) based on antitrust analysis of the degree of concentration in a particular economic sphere. This takes into consideration the number of different media outlets (broadcast television, radio, newspaper and the Internet) in any one market, the number of companies (or ‘voices’) in that market together with the weighting of each media sector in terms of consumer perception of their importance as a source of local news. The FCC’s example of ‘Anytown USA’ is a market (FCC 2003c: 9-10) in which there are 39 different media outlets where one company owns two of the eight television stations and three of the 26 radio stations, another company owns six of the 26 radio stations, where there are two separate daily papers and two separate internet providers. This adds to a DI rating of 738, well below the threshold of ‘moderate concentration’ of 1000 and far below the DI of 1800 which constitutes a ‘highly concentrated’ market.

This is a highly unsatisfactory way of assessing diversity for a number of reasons. Firstly, market share is worked out simply in terms of the total number of outlets and not in terms of actual sales or ratings. This means that the market share of a community-owned or independent radio station with low audiences and minimal advertising is precisely the same as a commercial one with much larger audiences and more income. This immediately exaggerates the diversity of real markets where large radio groups such as Clear Channel will be able to use their resources and market power to exert far more influence over that locality than their ‘competitors.’ Secondly, the DI’s quantitative methodology fails to assess the type of views that are actually expressed; there may be 26 separate radio stations but they may largely be playing to the same tune. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the FCC’s example is extremely unusual and therefore misleading: only a tiny number of cities in the USA have two separate daily newspapers just as the existence of 18 separate radio ‘voices’ in one area is also increasingly rare. It means ignoring markets like Mansfield, Ohio where Clear Channel owns 11 out of the 17 radio stations or Albany, Georgia where Cumulus owns eight of the 15 stations. Research carried out by the Centre for Public Integrity (Dunbar and Pilhofer 2003) discovered large numbers of radio markets controlled by either one or two broadcast companies. This is set to increase with the liberalisation of ownership rules. In summary, the index
employed by the FCC is a means of measuring diversity where what is being said is entirely irrelevant, where audience share and market power is ignored, and where only the number of people speaking and the form of speech is measured.

Conclusion

The diversity that is expressed in contemporary liberalising policy initiatives is therefore extremely partial. It is based, above all, on the conviction that market forces are best able to underwrite the provision of different views and that regulatory intervention, while necessary to correct ‘market failure’ is to be minimised and avoided where possible. It relies on a conception of diversity that is both quantitative and consumer-led, about maximising the number of outlets (in the name of pluralism) and emphasising audience choice between these outlets.

Of course, the central irony about such legislative developments is that they are likely to reduce plurality as we see disturbing levels of concentration within the media industries. This makes Benjamin Compaine’s contribution to a fierce debate about global media ownership (see http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/issue-8-24.jsp) resemble wishful thinking rather than rigorous analysis. Underlying his argument that media concentration is not a significant problem is the notion that market forces are the most efficient and democratic mechanisms for ensuring a diversity of views, claiming that the ‘democracy of the marketplace may be flawed but it is, if anything, getting better, not worse’ (Compaine 2001).

In this context, appeals to diversity are a smokescreen behind which a significant restructuring and marketisation of the media is taking place. It is true that ownership rules alone do not provide an immediate guarantee of meaningful diversity but without them a free and frank discussion is unlikely to take place. Contemporary ‘pluralist’ media policy is making even this minimal task more difficult.
Secondly the idea that the ‘social markets’ which exist in the US and UK lead to the expression of diverse views is barely credible when one examines the highly partisan coverage of, for example, the Iraq War by the US media and the only marginally less consensual coverage in the British media where 15 out of the 17 national newspapers supported the invasion in their leader columns. Any critical reporting that did take place was more likely the result of a desire to tap into burgeoning anti-war opinion that it was the result of an intrinsically pluralistic media system. The relentless criticism of Tony Blair’s support for George Bush and the invasion of Iraq in the tabloid Daily Mirror (often used to symbolise the diversity of the British press) was unprecedented but highly unstable, disappearing when there were no immediate commercial benefits. The market proved to be a very unreliable guarantor of diversity even in a situation marked by political divisions and public opposition.

Nevertheless, it is clear from the objectives of both recent British and US media regulation that rules designed to liberalise the media environment are being introduced expressly in the name of diversity and plurality. This sleight of hand has occurred by re-defining diversity as the consequence of the expansion of consumer choices in the marketplace. There is, apparently, no alternative: the question, according to media policy researcher Damien Tambini, ‘is not whether competition will deliver pluralism, but how to put in place the competition framework, and other measures, [which] will deliver pluralism’ (Tambini 2001: 41/2). Competition will deliver pluralism and pluralism, understood as referring to the number of outlets functioning in the marketplace, will deliver diversity which, according to James Curran, ‘is advanced primarily in terms of catering for different tastes rather than giving expression to different perspectives and cultures (Curran 2002: 212).

Today’s market-minded media regulators are neutering meaningful concepts of diversity through their neo-liberal reforms. Diversity ought not be simply about recognising differences but acting on them, acknowledging the social, political and economic divisions that mark contemporary life and using the media to articulate them in the hope that solutions may be identified and pursued. This is not a question of satisfying the
consumer palette nor of paying lip service to cultural differences but of integrating
fundamental arguments and disagreements about key issues into the fabric of the media
in order to realise the First Amendment commitment to publicise ‘diverse and
antagonistic sources’.

This requires structural changes to our media systems that are precisely the opposite of
those currently being implemented and which would involve the strengthening of
ownership restrictions and the tightening of positive content rules. However, it relies
more profoundly on a rejection of the pluralist belief in the efficacy of the market as a

pluralism cannot just be equated with competition. It needs to mean more than this:
namely media diversity supported by an open process of contests in which different
social groups have the opportunity to express divergent views and values. This
broader definition implies a commitment to extending freedom of expression,
broadening the basis of self-determination, and promoting equitable outcomes
informed by awareness of opposed opinions and interests.

This ‘broader’ definition of diversity refers not to the simple number of newspapers,
television channels or radio stations available but to an understanding that media should
recognise and highlight the conflicts and disagreements that pervade the world today.
References


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