

## Book Review

*The Politics of Media Policy*  
Des Freedman  
(Polity Press, 264 pp., \$25.95)

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Whether it is through the internet, television, or radio, the media permeates many aspects of one's life. In *The Politics of Media Policy*, author Des Freedman (2008) considers the values and assumption of key players in the media policymaking field. Rather than viewing media policy as a purely administrative or legal matter, Freedman attempts to re-establish a sense of agency and politics in media policy by defining media policy, discussing the difference between pluralist versus neoliberal viewpoints, interpreting media policy principles, discussing the issues of media ownership and content policies, and defining the purpose of public broadcasting. While *The Politics of Media Policy* does a decent job of explaining the evolution of media, the author fails to make a compelling argument about exactly who and what shapes media policy and its relation to the health of government.

Freedman defines media as the ways in which public authorities shape the structures and practices of the media, and he defines media policy as principles that guide these structures and practices. According to the author, the media is shaped by "competing political interests that seek to inscribe their own values and objectives on the possibilities facilitated by a complex combination of technological, economic, and social factors" (Freedman 2008, 1). In other words, media policy is shaped by deliberate political interventions aided by a multitude of political, economical, and technological

forces. Its future is hard to predict. It is a dynamic process that focuses on the interplay between different actors, the institutional structures in which they work, and the objectives they pursue.

According to Freedman, pluralists view the media as necessary to supporting the function of democracy. This is fulfilled by guaranteeing media access to a range of voices and opinions without discrimination, creating a “communication channel” between the state and public, and creating a climate where citizens are informed about issues perceived to be important to their lives (Freedman 2008, 31). In addition, there is a large focus on protecting the rights and privacy of citizens. These principles have shaped and guided media policy to its current state and influenced the media tools and regulations implemented over the years.

Pluralism and neo-liberalism share some similarities when it comes to media policy. They are both committed to democracy of the marketplace and freedom from the state. In contrast to pluralism, neo-liberalism focuses on personal responsibility, personal gain, and private property as fundamental principles. Neo-liberalism also places a large emphasis on deregulation, liberalization, and marketization. According to Freedman, pluralism is often used to justify existing media policy, while neo-liberalism is often used to critique existing media policy (Freedman 2008).

The author cites four distinct principles that underlie media policy-making: freedom, the public interest, pluralism, and diversity. Freedom is at the core of media policy as an individual right and is necessary to maintain democracy. The public interest is used as a “check” mechanism, often serving to defend policy initiatives and providing a standard against which these initiatives can be measured. Finally, Freedman claims that a pluralistic media system is an essential prerequisite for media diversity. Pluralists advocate for media access to a wide range of voices and opinions, leading to diversification of the media.

According to Freedman, media ownership and content policy are major issues in current media policy debates. Media ownership is a concern when major conglomerates own large amounts of media outlets because “of the largely unaccountable political and economic power that accrues to those individuals and corporations with extensive media interests and

because they are able to deploy their market power to act as influential cultural gatekeepers” (Freedman 2008, 106). This challenges the pluralistic principles of competition, free range of voices and opinions, and multiple sources of information.

Additionally, media content policies bring another actor into the media policymaking arena – public interest groups. Media watchdog organizations, such as the Parents Television Council, play a significant role in influencing media content regulations. For example, prior to 2003, use of certain profane language was accepted on television as long as it was not “indecent” (Freedman 2008, 128). However, after several “accidental” slips of the tongue, the Parents Television Council lobbied for a change in regulation. From that point forward, the Federal Communications Commission used stricter orders and issued hefty fines for violators.

Freedman discusses public broadcasting as a necessity to a pluralistic media policymaking environment, because its main purpose is to engage viewers and listeners in a conversation about public life. Rather than attracting viewers and selling to advertisers, as in commercial media, public broadcasting caters to viewers regardless of location or social position. It attempts to cultivate the “we-feeling” membership of communities as opposed to the “I-feeling” engaged through the free market’s emphasis on individual consumer preferences. Interestingly, critics of public broadcasting disagree, arguing that regardless of the potential that public broadcasting companies such as PBS have, their news broadcasts are strikingly similar to commercial broadcasts (Kerbel, Apee, and Ross 2000). Freedman does not offer commentary on his critics’ viewpoints.

While *The Politics of Media Policy* does a respectable job of explaining the evolution of media, the author falls short of convincing the audience of who and what shapes media policy and its relationship to government. Instead, he glosses over several subjects without connecting thoughts across chapters. In addition, while the author does discuss media policy in the global market, more emphasis on the regulations and implications of media globalization would help make the book a more comprehensive read. Despite these shortcomings, the book is informative and a good primer for those interested in learning more about media policy.

## References

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- Kerbel, Matthew R., Sumaiya Apee, and Marc Howard Ross. "PBS Ain't So Different: Public Broadcasting, Election Frames, and Democratic Empowerment." *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 5, no. 4 (2000): 8-32. (accessed January 11, 2010).

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