

Des Freedman, **The Politics of Media Policy**, Polity Press, 2008, 264 pp., \$69.95 (hardcover), \$25.95 (paperback).

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*The Politics of Media Policy* is a valuable and accessible book on media studies. It is clearly written and addresses key media policy issues in a comprehensible and appropriate manner, while avoiding the overly complex or technical discussions that often dishearten those aiming to better understand the field. Attempting to address media policy in the UK and the U.S., this book may leave other untypical cases of Western media systems outside its scope, but it is definitely a useful text for those exploring key trends and traits of media policy today.

Author Des Freedman critically views the market-oriented and neoliberal character of media policy in the UK and the U.S. and grounds his critique in interviews with politicians, regulators, lobbyists, special advisers, activists, and members of think tanks in the two countries. Regardless of the usefulness of his critique and the relevant research framework, one might wonder how a bottom-up and socially considerate account of media policy and its democratic character can be provided without echoing the voice of society per se. One can imagine, for instance, research that captures ordinary people's views of media policy as a means of accounting for the socially accountable character of media policy and its immediate or indirect impact on people's lives (Tsatsou, 2009). It is what Chakravartty and Sarikakis (2006, p. 5) have referred to when talking about "the politics of everyday life," in which the public(s) play an often indirect role (and one more often neglected by official policymakers) that is, nevertheless, still very critical in the shaping of media policy. Although Freedman cites the work by Chakravartty and Sarikakis, he argues that

media policy ought to be a field that is open to resource-poor groups with competing voices and different objectives, but, in reality, it is not; it is a process that, for all its conflicts, is ultimately dominated by those with the most extensive financial, ideological and political resources who are best able to mobilize their interest against their rivals.  
(p. 22)

Depressing as such an argument might be, it contains some truth, though not the whole truth. At the top level, elites can draw the policy lines that direct the authorities' attention and drive their decisions. At a lower level, however, elites are in communication with the public, though often on uneven and unjust terms, and regularly become involved in policy bargaining with the interests of certain sectors of society in mind. Also, if one looks at how policy-making procedures are organized, in the EU for instance, one can observe public consultations where both official bodies and individual citizens can participate and have a



say with respect to the present and future of media policy. (Nevertheless, this is another debate about competing interests and their relentless power struggle, some aspects of which at the EU level are discussed in Mahoney, 2004).

The book begins with the striking question: "Is policy political?" (p. 1). One might spontaneously respond, "Yes." How can policy not be political, as *political* or *politics* tend to be present in virtually all aspects of social life? (In everyday communication, we tend to say of almost everything: "It's all politics.") Freedman identifies *politics* with the value-loaded, subjective and interest-driven factors that drive the course of media policy today, and with the far from mechanical, socially, fully corresponding and administratively driven descriptions of the field. Although I have no objection to such a definitional approach, I wonder whether the definition of the forces driving policy as "institutional, economic, technological and governmental dynamics" (p. 4) actually omits society and the frequently competing interests within a social web of actors. This brings me back to the question: How one can account for the socially and democratically required character of media policy, if not by considering civic society and its role?

More specifically, Freedman's discussion in chapter 2 (pluralist vs. neoliberal media policy) and in chapter 3 (principles of media policy and their reinterpretation) provides useful theoretical and "historically" informed arguments about key ideologies and principles in media policy and their (false? distorted?) integration into prevailing neoliberal media policies today. However, this discussion implies that, in media policy, everything is about politicians and market players and their power struggle to set the agenda and treat instrumentally the principles of freedom, pluralism, and the public interest (which media policy is supposed to "serve") in accordance with their own self-interests. Freedman's discussion places the public (society) at the core of the struggle between political and economic forces, but without participating in that struggle. However, the public — though inherently active and beneficial to policymaking — should not be perceived only as neglected, as Freedman notes in chapter 4 when he talks about the threats to the pluralist principles of competition, transparency, accountability, and scientific values that drive policymaking today. "Public opinion," he says,

is collected to lend support to predetermined policy objectives, but otherwise the process remains largely out of reach for members of the public and is therefore skewed by a fundamental imbalance in both resources and influence between public and private interests. (p. 104)

I would argue that, on the contrary, the public can be active or passive, beneficial, or harmful. It can be *one* or *many*. It can be lobbied by or independent from other policy forces. It can have one or many representatives and can represent consistent or contradictory voices of interest. It can leave the door to policy outcomes open or keep it shut for good, confirming in the latter case Freedman's argument about "predetermined policy objectives."

In the chapters that follow, Freedman substantiates his argument about the democratic deficit and the politicized forces driving today's prevalent neoliberal media policy, conducting a discussion specific to the following domains: media ownership (chapter 5), media content (chapter 6), public broadcasting

(chapter 7), the politics of digital/copyright (chapter 8), and trade agreements (chapter 9). His domain-specific discussion is rich in contemporary examples of media policies in the UK and the U.S., attempting to provide an insider's look at discourses, arguments, and processes that take place in setting today's neoliberal policy agendas in each domain. For instance, in relation to policing media content, Freedman argues,

pro-market governments seem to be quite prepared to advocate economic liberalism, to resort to forms of authoritarian populism and, at the same time, to use their power to lean on broadcasters and journalists — behaviour that points to a more fundamental contradiction about the interventionist role of the neo-liberal state. (p. 146)

Again, in his critique, the triple pole of market-media-politics seems to dominate the picture, with very few references to the presence and role of civic society. Civic society and its interests do appear to be at stake, with civic actors being essentially absent from the politics of media policy.

Even in chapter 7, where the policy and regulatory approaches to public service broadcasting — mainly in the UK and to a lesser extent in the U.S. — are disentangled on the basis of a multicoloured landscape of economic, technological, commercial, and political factors, the discussion of government's attempt to strike a balance between commercial interests and public service broadcasters' mission to serve the public scarcely echoes the actual theses and claims of the public. So, when Freedman discusses the British government's plans for making the BBC subject to public value tests of its services, he is clearly considering the incremental role of commercial interests, even when it comes to public value assessments: "Public value tests will generate enormous amounts of data — the 'evidence-based' approach favoured by Ofcom — that are far better suited to an understanding of broadcasting as a straightforward economic, rather than a complex social and cultural practice" (p. 157). Unfortunately, the author fails to further elaborate precisely the complex social and cultural practices of public broadcasters, as society and its culture are left rather outside his account.

Freedman continues this argument in chapter 8, where he explains government regulation of the digitization of television and of copyright violation in the context of market pressure and the demand of creative industries to expand their activities and not lose revenue to illegal downloading. Freedman argues that governments in the two countries completely neglect the "public" or "cultural" character of creative, communication, and entertainment services, treating them like any other commercial product. This is also supported in chapter 9, where he takes a more international perspective, and his discussion of free trade agreements illustrates, besides the relative differences in the policy histories of the two countries, the dominance of the neoliberal ideology in pursuit of increased exports of cultural and media products, cultural influence, and other economic benefits.

To conclude, the restriction of the discussion to elite actors' voices on media policy and the role of the public can be understood when this is implicit to the goal of the research (see Livingstone, Lunt & Miller, 2007). On the other hand, the marginalization of society in policy making should not be approached by only emphasizing the overwhelming role of the market. The significant influence that a powerful market

exerts on policy making does not, by default, entail the marginalization of social actors in policy making, as Freedman seems to argue in this book.

Nevertheless, and beyond this critical view of Freedman's book, this work should be considered in relation to how media policy comes in shape and operates in other national media systems. Along this suggestion, Freedman's conclusion below is worth further examination from scholars and researchers in the field:

The mere existence of websites publishing consultations, facilitating citizens' access to official information and carrying public comment back to policy makers, does little to challenge the control over the policy making process exercised by senior civil servants, government ministers and well-resources private interests. While the number of people involved in the policymaking process is increasing along with the size of the industry, entry into and control over this process remains highly restricted. (p. 223)

### **References**

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