

Beyond New Media Hype: Why Today's Media Policy Debates Need Teletext Research



*Teletext is rarely discussed by media scholars, yet it remains widely popular among audiences and has been adapted in various ways to the new online, mobile environment. **Hilde Van Den Bulck** of the University of Antwerp and **Hallvard Moe** of the University of Bergen argue that investigating the history of this often forgotten medium provides an important context for understanding new media policy today and **call for contributions** to Teletext research.*

When the BBC's Ceefax, the first teletext service developed in 1974, **went off air in October 2012**, it caused a wave of tributes both on new 'hot' media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, and in traditional media. This was dismissed as a 'bout of nostalgia' by some. However, the massive response to Ceefax's shut off echoes the huge and continued success of teletext with broadcasters and audiences alike in countries all over Europe, including Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and the Nordic countries and the UK.

Teletext's continued success in Europe

Utilizing free distribution capacity in terrestrial broadcast networks in the 1970s, teletext was the result of experiments that started with subtitle services but grew to provide a wide range of services to diverse audiences. Teletext's popularity with broadcasters and audiences survived the arrival of internet, digitization, mobile and social media. In some cases, it appears these new media even helped to secure teletext's continued success.

In several countries, such as Switzerland and Norway, teletext pages have made the transition to internet and are very popular, and in 2012 the **teletext mobile media app** was the most popular (and most downloaded) app of Flemish public service broadcaster VRT.



VRT's Teletext App

Teletext ignored by academic

This success with European broadcasters and audiences contrasts sharply with the neglect of teletext by academic researchers. At best it is mentioned 'in passing', as by-product of traditional broadcasting services, and often considered on its way out with the rapid introduction of new hyper-mobile, social and other text-based digital services. Even major works on European broadcasting history tend to neglect this part of institutional and journalistic developments.

However, there are many indications that the study of the historical development of teletext, in terms of technology, content, interactivity, audiences and policies, is highly relevant. It is interesting in its own right as a hugely popular, intricately developing and easily adjusting medium. Also, understanding the development of teletext can help scholars as a means to modify and put into historical perspective the latest hypes and fads. Much media and communication research, like the rest of our culture, is preoccupied with the newest, novelty, innovation. Much of our energy goes into understanding, mapping, analysing new events, new media technologies – as they develop, while the issues are fresh and current. By focusing on less novel but successful media, apparently 'lurking' in the back, we can overcome the historical short sightedness of much current research into new media developments, including the spread of the web.

Studying "old" Teletext to understand "new" media policy



When the history of the internet is told, it typically and narrowly starts with the **ARPA** in the US in the 1960s. However, above and beyond this technological history, there is another story of teletext as a laboratory for the development of concise content, advertising, shopping and games. Each of these proved useful models for today's internet content and use. Internet policy making too, in some cases such as Norway, can only be understood through an analysis of policy making as it developed around teletext.

In short, teletext deserves much more scholarly attention. To improve our knowledge of this fascinating medium, we invite scholars to **contribute to an edited volume** (published by Nordicom) on this topic.

The article gives the views of the authors, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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