Media Policy and the Party Manifestos – Some Ideas

Now is the time in the political cycle when the main parties are writing their manifestos. So what could go in the media policy sections? **The Media Policy Project does not have a partisan position.** *I here offer my personal view of some of the potential policy commitments that parties should consider.*

Only policies that cost nothing or that generate funds are likely to be seriously considered in the coming election cycle. It is important however in the communications sector that this does not lead to a raid on spectrum revenues by the Treasury, and that the UK's strong media sector continues to be able not only to generate growth and innovation, but to support democratic citizenship. The only other general requirement is that policies offer some flexibility. None of the major parties can seriously exclude the possibility of coalition.

Public Service Media. Set out a roadmap to increase certainty.

The government needs to deal with the chronic long-term regulatory uncertainty that is undermining investment in UK media. There is uncertainty about what markets the BBC should enter, and about the overall future balance between public and private investment in media. A future government should give a clear signal that the BBC, and also public service competition for the BBC are a permanent feature of the UK media in the post analogue age, and set out a roadmap for maintaining their role. Ways of doing this could include: implementing the Ofcom idea of a 'Public Service Publisher' to distribute funds from spectrum licensing, network levies and licence fees to multiple content providers. The government should appoint a commission of civil society representatives to review all public funding mechanisms across the media, including tax breaks, and review the evidence on what can be done through programme guides and other technologies, to make public service content more 'findable' and 'shareable'.

A Media Policy for Innovation

The UK should support both existing media with public service objectives and new, innovative services. Key to this strategy are: support for net neutrality across Europe, more unlicensed spectrum for innovation, and more open content and open data to allow services to be built using the UK's rich heritage.

Promoting Voice Through Media Policy

In broadcasting, the commissioning process must be further opened up, particularly at Channel Four where on-demand services create multiple new possibilities for the creation of public value. The Channel Four remit should be revised. It should be all about strategic moves to stimulate and expand the range of voices that contribute to Britain's public culture.

A Citizens Panel for Ofcom

If Ofcom is to serve the public better it needs to be closer to the public. The regulator should have more direct representation of the public and accept direct complaints from the public in more areas than it currently does. The Ofcom Consumer Panel should take on a new role as a complaints appeals body and incorporate representatives of the expanding range of civil society, and consumer groups, coordinating the new bodies that have responsibility for consumer representation. A more accountable Ofcom should permit the government to recognise the

independent policymaking function for Ofcom and underline the general principle of regulatory independence.

Digital inclusion across all education

Not everyone will be a programmer, but the next wave of UK productivity growth will depend on UK success in digital education. In the past, digital skills were seen as an issue only for the highly skilled. Now a lack of basic computer literacy can act as a barrier to employment in all jobs and in general citizen participation. Government needs to take a lead role in ensuring that no one is left behind through mainstreaming basic digital skills in schools and lifelong learning.

A new approach to Online Public services

A one size fits all approach to public services is reaching its limits. The next wave of efficiencies in Government service delivery will depend on reaching the hard to reach with digital services. The government should establish a one stop shop for all government agencies to help them understand hard to reach demographics and alleviate the effects of the possible 'switch off' of analogue public services for vulnerable groups such as the elderly.

Implement Leveson

It is unclear whether self-regulation of the press will have been resolved by May 2015. A new government should take appropriate steps to encourage early and constructive resolution of this unhelpful impasse. Leveson himself predicted that the powerful megaphone of press interests may drown out public debate of the public interest in areas such as media plurality and ownership. Parties should seek commitment that the cross party consensus will be maintained post-election, and extend this to develop new policies to promote media pluralism with cross-party support.

New Institutions to Promote Child Safety on the Internet

For too long, UK policy on child safety has been a series of unrealistic promises from government and buck passing between internet companies, governments and schools. The existing government body, the UK Council for Child Internet Safety should be replaced with a policy coordination body to advise on changing technologies and their implications for child safety. This body should involve industry in a multi-stakeholder model, but be genuinely independent and have the specific task of maintaining advisory committees including representatives of schools, parents and child protection agencies. A separate co-regulatory body should be set up to act as an arbiter of appeals for filtering, blocking and takedowns, expanding and updating the work of the Internet Watch Foundation, and applying reasonable standards for protection of free speech.

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

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