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Social Regulation: Synthesis of the Debate

'Setting Welfare Objectives for Communication Policy'

1. Setting objectives

As chairman of the workshop on Social Regulation, Prof. Jan Servaes started off by pointing out that all the presentations of the morning's keynote speakers were announcing a shift to more socially-focused concerns in communication policy. Nevertheless, Prof. Servaes also pointed out that these concerns were still expressed at a rather general and abstract level.

As an initial answer to this remark, Professor Jean-Claude Burgelman's presentation offered a first framework for clarifying the objectives of such social concerns. From his point of view, the social contract, defined as a series of guarantees concerning the right of labour, protection of poverty, prevention against social risks and promotion of equal chances, is currently threatened in all its aspects by the rise of the Information Society.

Focusing on media policy, Prof. Jan van Cuilenburg also confirmed in his presentation that from the 80s onwards, technological, economic and social trends have fundamentally changed the context of media policy and that a new communication policy paradigm has to be found. This new paradigm would have to answer such questions as the future of the public sector and its core missions, and the legitimacy and means of content control, if any. Again, political, social and economic welfare was presented as framing necessary ultimate goals.

The Group of Lisbon's reflections (1995) offer another framing tool for determining the objectives of a redefined policy framework. As such, this frame is an urgent plea for a set of four worldwide contracts aiming at equal chances for accessing basic needs, cultural dialogue, world democracy and sustainable development. Its specificity, if compared to other frameworks, is to broaden the objectives of regulation to encompass issues such as democracy and environmental issues, considered as systemically linked in a globalised economy. It also

competes with the opinion that communication policy would be exclusive or central to the issue of future welfare in a so-called Information Society.

The nuances between these three complementary frameworks were little discussed. Nevertheless, there was a major consensus among the members of the workshop when considering the necessity of:

- a broad definition of the (re-)regulation's objectives, based on a reflection on the core issues that are at the root of a contemporary social contract (as opposed to narrow adaptations of sector-focused regulations)
- a consequently creative (re-)regulation of communication policy (as opposed to constraining regulation to the undesirable effects of a strictly competition-regulated society and/or market).

2. Making objectives operational

A far less consensual issue concerned the role of the State and the means that have to be mobilised to generate and control new communication policies in a globalised world.

Social Equity and basic needs

When considering universal service as a means of fulfilling the 'Equal chances for accessing basic needs' objective, the concept of 'accessibility' was questioned.

Professor Van Cuilenburg argued that: 'communication policy for access should aim at the greatest freedom for communication, for the greatest number of suppliers and users, and should monitor and correct any situation in which control over access is subject to market failure and is unequally distributed between groups in society'.

Participants in discussing this proposition clarified various conceptual and operational aspects related to this 'accessibility' issue by:

- opposing 'access for use', as a guarantee for free or facilitated access e.g. to equipment and services in the area of tele-education or tele-medicine, to 'access to a content' which refers to a cultural objective (see below)
- underlining the necessity of organising accompanying educational measures to guarantee the effectiveness of access
- distinguishing between awareness-oriented vs skill-oriented training, between fostering effective participation of all vs 'mere' workforce adaptation to new production processes. This emphasis on training policy echoes the Commission's Green Paper (European Commission, 1996f: 16)

- imagining public support services such as community-based networks and other enabling services and «empowerment» initiatives
- questioning the realism of the proposals when considering the effective state of basic needs in the world, their affordability when observing the state of public finances, and their necessity when considering that they reinforce a fast-growing industrial market. The discussion then turned towards the funding of these needs
- evoking the public or private financing of the information society. A debate about specific or general taxing systems occurred, as possible determinant for supporting equity- or 'happy few'-oriented trends
- discussing the role and reliability of the State regarding such issues. As quoted also by the Group of Lisbon (Groupe de Lisbonne, 1995: 27), participants coming from countries with (ex-)authoritative regimes testify to the unreliability of the state system in specific circumstances to guarantee basic needs for everybody. Nevertheless, the term of 'Enabling State' was proposed to characterise this role for national public authorities.

Earlier suggestions of the High Level Expert Group on the Information Society appear to be in line with this discussion, notably when it claims in its intermediary report the need of shifting to a concept of universal community service as opposed to a universal individual service;

'There is a need to investigate whether, in order to avoid exclusion (...), the existing concept of universal service should not be shifted in the direction of a concept of universal community service, extending universal service provision to incorporate a basic level of access to new information services, but limited in its obligation of universality to the educational, cultural, medical, social and economic institutions of local communities... It would (...) involve, where necessary, public funding for technical and financial assistance' (European Commission, 1997a: 41-42).

Cultural diversity and dialogue

If aiming at a 'cultural dialogue', should a public authority provide itself with any specific content? In Professor Burgelman's opinion a government should only be an 'enabler' in this domain and should not be a provider of content. This opinion directly questions the very existence of public services offering information or entertainment, such as state-financed national broadcasting.

On this topic, opposite positions in various areas were discussed:

- if public broadcasting was traditionally considered as the better guarantee for cultural diversity, the risk of governmental ideological propaganda or cultural imposition is today heavily emphasised

- to oppose the cultural paternalist argument 'Who decides what is good for people?', a new plea was made in favour of schooling and formal education as a basic tool for socialisation and cultural empowerment
- State censorship power was discussed as a means or a threat, including the legitimacy and effectiveness of filtering tools to be delivered to the citizen
- demand-oriented, that is market-driven, diversity was criticised. On this basis, Professor van Cuilenburg's plea for a 'new communication policy paradigm focusing on media market structures rather than on media content' was questioned.

Clearly enough, the regulation of content appeared a much harsher issue among the participants to the workshop. Cultural diversity, and furthermore the means to encourage dialogue between cultures raise more questions than it provides concrete answers.

Democracy at all levels

This objective was not specifically put forward. Nevertheless some arguments have been developed which might lead to an overall understanding of the issue:

- potential applications to foster democracy such as the possibility of public-funded community networks, were presented
- the threat of out-of-control communication tools, both for the state as for the citizen was put forward
- the question was raised of determining the adequate national and international institutions to address all these issues in a democratic way. It underlines the existing contradiction of managing globalisation within subsidiarity, societal issues within media policies, the Information Society project within a group of industrialists or civil servants of the EC. Part of these questions are also addressed in the Group of Lisbon's report. It was suggested to consider the existing regional, national and international institutions and to offer support to open up the debate on communication or media policy within those institutions.

Sustainable development

The link between sustainability and the Information Society had been largely put forward and analysed within existing institutions such as the United Nations (Mansell & Wehn, 1998). Little has been discussed on this topic during the workshop.

3. Conclusion

It may be concluded from this discussion that communication policy, and thus regulatory principles, are much more difficult to set once they are bound to an international context. Managing cultural differences and encouraging dialogue and diversity, identifying or initiating democratic procedures, developing global sustainability, all these objectives necessitate a substantial knowledge of the international scene and cross-sector issues. This expertise is, for obvious historical reasons, not ready-made taking our national regulatory habits and their analysis into account.