

Media and communications policy: a definition

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Media & communications policy: The term refers to the general principles which guide decisions of authorities, usually governments, about the function of the mass media. The objects of media policy are understood to be content, ownership of the media industries, matters of technical infrastructure and technological development, the relationship of the media with the public as well as matters regulating the relationship of the media with authorities and the market.

The study of media policy borrows from sociology, political sciences, anthropology and history. It involves the study of decisions regulating (or not regulating) media content, such as the broadcast of pornographic material or violence on day-time television, decisions that organise the media landscape into public and private organisations depending on the forms of ownership and those that guarantee or restrict the freedoms associated with expression, whether artistic or journalistic. Media policy furthermore refers to the set of norms and institutions that administer or manage the rights and obligations of media professionals and organisations, aiming at maintaining journalistic ethics, advertising standards and generally by (usually) self-regulating the relationship of the media with their publics.

Although media policy is usually made by national governments, it can also be made by state-like formations such as the European Union, or international organisations such as the WTO, as well as by the media themselves in their organisation of professions and industries. The study of media policy expands to cover the processes of policy-making, which involves actors and institutions as well as the set of values and beliefs that underlie the justification of certain decisions. More neglected is the systematic study of the effects of media policy for audiences as consumers of the media and as citizens who depend on the media for accurate information.

With the development of convergent technologies, such as computers, media policy covers areas such as the trafficking of personal data for commercial purposes, through the unauthorised monitoring of communicative activity, commercial or other, over the Internet but also the monitoring of use habits of new media (computer, mobile phones and integrated media systems) by state authorities. Increasingly, media policy is thought to constitute part of citizenship policy especially when it has an impact on civil liberties and human rights.