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## Book Reviews

Steve Buckley, Kreszentia Duer, Toby Mendel, and Sean O'Siochru (with Monroe E. Price and Marc Raboy)

***Broadcasting, Voice, and Accountability: A Public Interest Approach to Policy, Law, and Regulation***

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008. 416 pp. ISBN 978 0 472 03272 3

■ Reviewed by Amit M. Schejter, *Pennsylvania State University, USA*

Call it fate or call it coincidence. Just as world leaders were scrambling for solutions to the recent global market meltdown, I happened to be reading the World Bank's *Broadcasting, Voice, and Accountability*, which describes itself as the 'first publication presenting good practices from around the world in media and broadcasting policy and regulation'.

As I see it, there are two immediate lessons that can be learned from observing the helplessness of governments around the world in confronting the crisis in the financial sector that can be applied to a 'best practices' approach to broadcast regulation: first, that when push comes to shove, free market knights forget all their capitalist bravado and go running for cover behind their governments' apron strings; and second, that the term 'global economy' is no longer a theoretical concept being bounced around the halls of academia, but rather an omnipresent 'game-changing' reality.

These two lessons have great relevance to this book, whose stated purpose is to 'provide guidelines on how to design a policy, legal, and regulatory framework that can contribute to the achievement of public interest goals' (p. 2) in broadcasting policy, 'particularly in developing and transitional democracies ... and anywhere people aspire to a deeper democracy' (p. 3), because establishing a broadcasting system based on market considerations alone will not and cannot serve the public interest, and because learning from international experiences has become a smart choice.

The basic premise of this publication is that in order for media – and, in particular, broadcasting – to serve the public interest, they need to be regulated in a way that is consistent with specific values and that while these values may be universal, they need to be upheld in each nation in a way that works best for that nation. So, while the authors – a group of senior and accomplished World Bank advisers and prominent academics – agree that regulation is mandatory for a democratically functioning media market, they don't go so far as to advocate creating a uniform global media regulatory model, instead preferring to let each nation devise its own body of regulation that fits the specific conditions of its market while learning from others' experiences.

Still, it is tempting to imagine what would happen if a nation were to adopt all the policies prescribed in *Broadcasting, Voice, and Accountability*. Taking a Habermasian view of the 'public interest', the book defines it as 'mediating among ... interests, encouraging and offering incentives and, where necessary, imposing obligations and constraints on each group, while evading capture by any specific interest' (p. 8). This is achieved, according to the authors, by strengthening the media's contribution to three aspects of public life: good governance; participatory communication; and cultural pluralism (p. 19). The ideal model that emanates from these goals requires both the creation of an enabling environment through constitutional and legal structures and the specific design of a broadcasting system that strikes a balance among public service, and commercial and community media, all overseen by an independent regulator. Specifically, the authors advocate three reforms they deem 'extremely important' for the development of a healthy broadcasting sector: establishing an independent broadcasting regulator; decriminalizing defamation in order to allow for criticism of the government; and promoting the formation of non-profit independent voices through proper funding.

*Broadcasting, Voice, and Accountability* is organized into four sections. The first, the introductory, provides a theoretical background and presents an international comparative survey of policies on a regional basis. In this section, the authors rely widely on broad comparative studies undertaken by international organizations, as well as on data that is mostly retrieved from sources available on the world wide web. In their concluding remarks, they lament the lack of data pertaining to broadcasting in many countries. There is clearly an unfortunate oversight here of peer reviewed academic research. Indeed,

there is a vast body of scholarship out there in the field of international and comparative communications systems that might have been used to strengthen some of the findings here.

The second section offers prescriptions for creating an 'enabling environment' that nurtures a free press. Together with the third section, which focuses specifically on broadcasting policy, these two sections make up the 'meat' of the book. Each legal prescription in these parts is described in very broad terms. However, the mere length of the list and its comprehensiveness makes it very useful as a starting point for a more extensive debate of each issue it raises. Having engaged in media law development, I found the coverage in this book to be exhaustive, and I was particularly impressed with the amount of thought and detail that went into discussing each specific issue, notwithstanding the brevity with which each one is discussed. There is one caveat, though, worth mentioning: while the authors recognize the transition in understanding the field of developmental communications from a top-down process to a bottom-up grassroots effort, half of the 54 very useful 'best practices' examples they cite pertain to media in Western European countries and the United States.

The fourth and final section is a bibliographic annex with lists of resources for future and further research. While some academic journal articles are mentioned here, those who compiled the annex, which is an extremely useful tool for launching relevant research, have chosen an unconventional method of citation. Rather than give the name of the journal in which the study appeared, they provide links to publishers' websites from where the articles can be purchased (if you do not happen to be connected to the internet through a library that subscribes to the database). Clearly, a more conventional form of citation would have been better.

The authors state outright that *Broadcasting, Voice, and Accountability* is not designed to be read from cover to cover (except, I guess, if you are asked to review it), but rather, to be used as a reference book. As such, I believe it can serve three main constituencies: law and policy makers in countries whose media systems are in flux can benefit from the comprehensive list of issues the book covers and use its recommendations as a good starting point for a public debate; media reformers around the world will be better able to assess their own systems by measuring them against a model of an ideal system conceived of by the authors; and students of comparative media systems will benefit greatly from the detailed bibliographical index, which provides a starting point for further research.