
4. DARIN BARNEY*

The question itself serves as a reminder: the central, non-negotiable fact of contemporary social life is a market economy in which private interests enjoy considerable material and political power. This reminder is served not by virtue of what the question asks, but by virtue of what it does not. It does not ask, for example: what is the ideal role of the market with respect to broadcasting governance? Nor does it ask: what is the ideal role of private, profit-seeking corporations with respect to broadcasting governance? To a certain extent, these questions about markets and private corporations are implied in the question about the State. Still, where we start matters to where we end up, and the fact that we are talking about a “role” for the State by which its approach to broadcasting is defined and circumscribed involves – I would gently submit – something of a concession from the outset.

This problem is also figured in the language typically employed in discussions about the role of the State in relation to mass media. The State is typically cast in the role of an “intervener” in the otherwise free and natural operation of markets. Right away this queers the pitch. Interveners are external forces, foreign to the domain in which they intervene: interveners shouldn’t ideally be there, unless unfortunate circumstances demand their presence and action. Why should we assume that the State – the will of citizens incorporated in a body authorized to act – is a foreign, unfortunate presence in economic markets and the cultural sphere? Is it not just as plausible to cast the capitalist corporation – which is, after all, as artificial as the State, and which necessarily sets private before public interest – in the role of the foreign and unfortunate intervener in otherwise public settings?

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By casting private, profit-seeking corporations in a “role” that defines the nature and limits of their intervention in the public sphere, we shift the burden of justification, and the terms of discussion. Outsiders intervene when “natural” outcomes are deemed inadequate according to a given set of criteria. This is the customary justification for State intervention in media and cultural markets: the State intervenes through public ownership, licensing, subsidy and regulation to ensure outcomes that private actors in markets otherwise fail to provide (e.g. levels of service and access; common standards; certain types of content, etc.). What justifies the intervention of private media corporations in the public sphere? What outcomes do they provide that a public sphere devoid of capitalist media would not?

Perhaps the answer lies in the contemporary offerings of private broadcasters: reality TV; ideologically driven news; programming that propagates stereotypes and consumer culture; the ability to deliver all of this to audiences across the globe. When public authority intervenes in private media markets to ensure domestic audiences’ access to diverse and/or domestic programming, or to prevent radio hosts from casually advocating the extermination of the mentally disabled, the flags of freedom are raised, and we fret over the proper “role” of the State in markets and culture; but when a massive private corporation intervenes in the public sphere to offer bikini-clad women eating the guts of rodents in vats full of snakes, we somehow do not rush to question the legitimacy of the “role” that profit-seeking media corporations play in public life.

One need not exaggerate the cultural benefits of public broadcasting, or minimize the illiberal potential of excessive State regulation, to be curious about why the burden of justification placed upon public intervention in private media markets is lately so much heavier than that placed on private interventions in the public sphere of culture. Nor does this imply a romantic view of the public character of the State – if the past two decades of neo-liberalization of media governance in Europe and North America have taught us anything, it is that the State is quite prepared to serve as the “executive committee for managing the common affairs of the bourgeoisie.” My point is simply that, when we ask the question about the proper role of the State in relation to broadcasting, it is too great a concession

to leave the same question about private corporations and markets merely implied.

That being said, the question remains. I think it is important that, in the midst of recognizing that changing technological conditions demand clear and creative thinking about innovative policy instruments, we not lose sight of the integrity of the basic justification for state stewardship of the broadcast spectrum. In the Canadian context, it remains the case that private media corporations seeking to convert audience attention into commercial profits consistently fail to produce a range of social goods we should reasonably expect from a public resource like the broadcast spectrum. The list of these goods is well known: intelligent, diverse and domestic content; domestic ownership and control of infrastructure; democratic accountability. The tragedy of capitalism is that the public good is almost never profitable. The role of the State is thus to mitigate the damage private media corporations do to the public sphere in their pursuit of market share and competitive advantage. It can do so by enforcing public obligations on private broadcasters, and by providing or supporting worthwhile alternatives. Of course, numerous techniques and strategies are possible within these parameters. In the present context, it is enough to affirm that State activity of this sort is not only legitimate, but necessary. So long as the apparatus by which such measures are developed and undertaken is sufficiently democratic, there is little reason to exaggerate the possibility of widespread or sustained illiberal abuse of State power. The State is far from perfectly democratic, but it is still more so than massive media corporations, whose operations lack transparency, and for which accountability extends to private consumers and shareholders, rather than to public citizens.

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5. RICHARD COLLINS*

It all depends... It depends on what we mean by the State (e.g. government, law, regulation, public sector enterprises), what kind of State we think is desirable (e.g. night watchman, social-democratic, totalitarian) and what our goals are.

Our definition and evaluation of the State's role are likely to be highly context-dependent. What will work or be appropriate for Australia may or may not be highly inappropriate for Belgium, South Africa or the United Kingdom.

And it depends crucially on whether we're talking normatively or empirically. The weight of the past presses heavily everywhere, and the limits of the possible seldom coincide with the frontiers of the desirable.

What are our goals?

We want a media and communication system through which individuals are able to control their lives, realize their potentialities and make informed choices between well-understood alternatives – are able to enjoy “freedom of access to the information necessary to full participation in economic, social and political life” (Collins and Murrioni 1996: 76).

But these are weasel words. My choice of words (including the choice to use “choices”) loads the argument. And choosing these words illustrates the gap that often separates the normative and the empirical. For not everyone (if their consumption practices tell us anything) primarily wants the media for information and/or for self-development; many want it to entertain them. A Benthamite (seeking the greatest happiness of the greatest number) will see little wrong with that, whereas an Aristotelean

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