

MEDIA POLICY FETISHISM

Introduction: official and unofficial spheres of media policymaking

Media policymaking is a disinterested and depoliticized sphere of activity. At least that is the claim of some of its most high-profile participants. Consider the language used by the former British culture secretary, Jeremy Hunt in response to accusations that he had compromised his impartiality in the light of his backing for News Corp's bid to take over the British broadcaster BSkyB in 2010-11. When presented with evidence such as his messages to News International chairman James Murdoch congratulating him on European Union competition regulators waving the deal through—"Great and congrats on Brussels, just Ofcom to go" he texted in March 2011 before then following up with a further message thanking Murdoch for his support and concluding that "think we got [the] right solution" (quoted in Wintour and Sabbagh, 2012)—he proclaimed his absolute independence in relation to the proposed acquisition (Hunt, 2012):

like a judge I should set aside any personal views...and make my decision objectively and impartially on the basis of the evidence presented to me. I should not be biased or make the decision on party political grounds. It should be a case-specific decision taken with reference to the issue of plurality of media ownership and not on other policy considerations (such as the impact on jobs, for example). It was a decision I should make alone, not consulting cabinet colleagues and not bound by the conventions of collective cabinet decision-making.

This is an excellent statement of pluralistic policymaking in which a range of views is sought, the evidence is considered carefully and a decision is reached based only on the merits of the specific situation. Special interests are held at bay while the public interest remains paramount.

In this “official” view of the media policy process, policies themselves are framed by “experts”: special advisers, lobbyists, technologists, industry figures, civil figures, pressure groups and the odd academic. They are developed in formal spaces: in Parliaments and government ministries, in think tanks and boardrooms, in committee rooms and high-level seminars. Policies exist on pieces of paper and are often written in arcane parliamentary language; they are to be applied indiscriminately and expected to achieve measurable effects. Policies are predicated on the need to have clear rules and regulations, demonstrable laws and liabilities. They are tangible, rational and necessary prescriptions for a healthy, modern media ecology. This narrative resembles Robert Dahl’s classic study of the political system in New Haven, Connecticut, *Who Governs?* (Dahl, 2005 [1961]), where politics is dominated by coalitions, by rival groups of actors and interests, none of whom could be said to exercise complete control. According to Dahl, “there was no clear center of dominant influence in the [political] order. No single group of unified leaders possessed enough influence to impose a solution” (2005, p. 198) – not a government minister, lobbyist nor a media baron.

These rather hygienic accounts of the media policy process have been extensively challenged by theorists refuting the notion that power in contemporary decision-making situations is sufficiently dispersed. While Mills (1959) and Miliband (1969) spoke of the distortions of an ‘elite pluralism’ the serves the interests of a

dominant class, Poulantzas (1973: 141) argued that a hegemonic ‘power bloc’ was central to securing political consent. Lukes, in his work on the different ‘faces’ of power, contrasted the visible aspect of policymaking with a further dimension in which power is associated with an ideological capacity to shape the preconditions for decision-making in order to ‘secure compliance to domination’ (2005, p. 111). From the collusion between politicians and media executives that was identified in the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, standards and ethics of the press that was set up the British government following the phone hacking scandal (Leveson, 2012) to the impact of corporate lobbyists in overturning net neutrality rules in the US (Wyatt, 2014), media policy has been revealed to be an area in which special interests dominate, in which money and influence plays a decisive role and in which short-term partisan priorities seem to trump long-term strategic considerations. Rather than being the “objective” and “impartial” process described by Jeremy Hunt above, it corresponds more closely to the description provided by Robert McChesney in *The Problem of the Media* where he argues that media policy making resembles a Mafia get-together where the heads of families divvy up the proceeds from a lucrative deal. “So it is with media policy making in the United States. Massive corporate lobbies duke it out with each other for the largest share of the cake, but it is their cake” (McChesney, 2003, p. 48).

In these more radical accounts, media policy is not the clean, administrative, depoliticized and unproblematic evidence-based space in which it is sometimes held up to be by pluralists. Instead, it refers to a process driven by conversations in inaccessible corridors of government, private rooms in top-end restaurants, inner sanctums of corporate HQs and invitation-only seminars where the agenda is often set

and where solutions to current “problems” (to the extent that some issues are seen as problems and others are not) are identified.

Media policy is messy and dirty—not simply characterized by dirty money in the sense of outright corruption or the fundamentally distorting impact of lobbying—but also because it cannot be separated from the ideological preferences, partisan self-interest, corporate priorities and personal compatibilities that circumscribe the process. It is hardly conspiratorial to suggest that there may be a link between the fact that Tony Blair, prime minister of Britain for over 10 years, is godparent to Grace, Rupert Murdoch’s second youngest child, and the fact that no action was ever taken by his government to confront Murdoch’s media power in the UK. Even *Vanity Fair*, in a long article revealing the very intimate relationship between Tony Blair and Murdoch’s ex-wife Wendi Deng, felt confident enough to insist that “through the power of *The Sun*, and his other London newspapers, the *Times* and *News of the World*, Murdoch had virtually put Blair into office” (Seal, 2014). Policy, politics, power and personalities are far from insulated from each other.

Media policy needs to be understood, however, not solely in terms of its association with elites as if it refers to a set of practices—whether practiced openly or covertly—that can *only* be undertaken by those with access to power and policy resources. It also refers to what Bill Kirkpatrick has eloquently argued as a “vernacular” practice: “the ways that unofficial media policies are formulated and enacted every day—in homes, schools, theatres, prisons, hospitals, stores, public places, and more” (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p. 636). Media policy, stripped of its exclusive character, is actually embedded in people’s lives and interacts with everyday practices of media consumption and production. Kirkpatrick gives the great example of how consumers used the \$40 coupons provided by the US government to offset the cost of

digital set-top boxes in the mid-2000s in creative ways: to buy two boxes they didn't need and then return them the next day in order to get store credit for something that they actually wanted. Focusing only on the “top-down” narrative “misses the dynamic and relational nature of how that official policy was translated and lived at different levels by a range of vernacular policymakers” (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p. 642).

As well as the official and unofficial spheres of the visible policy process, we also need to consider the assertion that media policy is defined not simply by the laws, rules and practices it generates but by the issues around which it *refuses* to mobilize. These have previously been described these as “media policy silences” (author removed, 2010): the gaps in the process, the unasked questions, untabled agendas, uninvited players and unspoken assumptions that account for the non-decisionmaking power at the heart of media policymaking. For example, why is the growing consolidation between internet service providers and content providers rarely seen by regulators as a threat to the “marketplace of ideas”. Why is it that “public subsidies” for public-oriented news are so often seen by policymakers as beyond the pale? Why is it that fixed limits on news market share are claimed not to enhance diversity but to undermine “commercial sustainability and innovation” (Ofcom, 2012, p. 2)? Why is the size of the publicly-funded BBC a “problem” while the size of Murdoch’s BSkyB, Britain’s largest broadcaster with revenues almost twice those of the BBC, is rarely commented on?

Yet, while I think this approach is still very relevant and helps us to fathom both the contours and the absences of the policy environment, we need a complementary approach if we are fully to make sense of the framing and conduct of the policy debates that are very much *in front of us*: the uproar over an open internet, the scale of government surveillance, the battles over press freedom and the pursuit of

media pluralism to name just a few issues. I do not intend here to provide a detailed account of the nuances of these debates but instead to provide a theoretical approach that may explain how the emergence of media policies so often seems to take place independently of the actions of those on whose behalf the policies are allegedly developed. It is an approach that aims to illuminate why elites continue to dominate media policymaking, why—with significant exceptions—we (by which, throughout this article, I mean ordinary citizens and users of communications technologies) are usually absent from policymaking debates, and why even public interest advocates who do participate in these debates often feel so disenfranchised from the process. This is why I want to propose an emphasis in the rest of this article on the relationship between media policy and commodity production and, in particular, on the specific phenomenon of commodity fetishism.

Commodity Fetishism

Out of all the elements of the media world, few people would immediately identify media policy with practices of fetishism: the worship of things made by humans but then endowed with god-like status. One might argue that *Mad Men*, *Game of Thrones*, a Vertu Signature Cobra mobile phone, a Stuart Hughes iPad2 or a curved 105 inch high-definition TV are more obvious targets for fetishistic urges than the internal machinations of the Federal Communications Commission or ongoing debates concerning the regulation of broadband. In reality, very few people—policy wonks and the author of this article excluded—worship at the altar of media policy. Neither, following the more somatic practices of fetishism, is an interest in policy a simple

displacement for other mediated activities; it is not designed to distract us from the central pleasure point of our media world whatever that may be.

Fetishism works at a much deeper level – shaping and distorting our relationship to products and processes that affect our lives. By drawing on ideas about commodity fetishism adopted initially by Karl Marx and developed by others including Georg Lukacs, Franz Jakubowski and the anthropologist Michael Taussig, this article aims to provide the basis for an understanding of media policy that is related to the systematic *loss of control* experienced by the vast majority of people under capitalism.

At the heart of this process is the commodity which is where, indeed, Marx began his analysis of capitalism. For Marx, a commodity is “first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind” (Marx, 1977 [1867], p. 125). However, one of the distinguishing features of capitalism is that it values the things we produce through our own labour not particularly in terms of their usefulness but in terms of their ability to be exchanged in a free market – to put it crudely, not for their social utility but for their financial rewards. Diamonds, which have little social purpose, are extremely valuable while staples like flour or rice are far less desirable. In essence, a commodity is a phenomenon that acquires value when it is exchanged or, as Marx puts it in relation to capitalist commodity production, exchange value is “the necessary mode of expression, or form of appearance, of value” (1977, p. 128).

Commodity production, therefore, is not an adjunct to but sits at the very core of capitalism. Indeed, many Marxists identify commodity production as *the* definitive feature of capitalism. For Georg Lukacs (1971, p. 83): “The problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in

economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects.” The Polish Marxist Franz Jakubowski echoes this point arguing that under capitalism, “social wealth appears as a vast collection of commodities. The commodity is therefore the root phenomenon of the capitalist economy and also of its ideological superstructure” (1976, pp. 87-88). This is why Marx refers regularly to the fact that while a commodity appears *initially* to be a quite straightforward thing—“an object with a dual character, possessing both use-value and exchange-value” (Marx, 1977, p. 131)—it is, in reality, far more elusive: “a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (1977, p. 163). Commodity production refers not simply to an economic but also a deeply ideological process in which the world is turned upside down.

The key reason for this is the value of the labour—whether intellectual or physical—required to produce all commodities is transferred under market relations from the labourer to the products of her labour. Marx claimed that objects of production appear to workers as something outside of them, as external and strange, even though it is their labour that has produced them. Instead of reflecting real social relations, labour becomes to be expressed in terms of relations between objects: between things and not between people. The “mysterious character” of commodities is explained simply by the fact that “the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things” (Marx, 1977, pp. 164-65). So producers lose their intimacy with everyday goods and transactions that, in the context of capitalist relations, acquire a kind of “mystical” power (1977, p. 164).

Marx originally turned to the concept of fetishism to describe the magical hold exerted by those very ordinary objects. Under capitalism a table, for example, is not just a table:

The form of wood, for instance, is altered, if a table is made out of it.

Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (1977, pp. 163-64)

The wonder of capitalism is that it is able to persuade us that the value of the table lies not with the labour that produced it but inside the table itself. The table appears to have an objective character independent of and separated from the social relations under which it was created. What Marx was alluding to in his analysis of the strange and mysterious world of commodities that exert such a fascination on us was *our loss of control*, our alienation from the productive process. The crucial point is not simply that we overvalue external objects and processes but that, in the act of doing so, we undervalue ourselves. In other words, we give life to, we *animate*, external objects or processes and, in the act of doing so, diminish our own power. Michael Taussig captures perfectly this notion of disempowerment when he argues that fetishism “denotes the attribution of life, autonomy, power, and even dominance to otherwise inanimate objects and presupposes the draining of these qualities from the human actors who bestow the attribution” (Taussig, 1980, p. 31).

Commodity fetishism therefore involves the projection of mystery, beauty and awe to objects that we have produced while at the same time concealing the fact that it was us – or at least our labour – that produced these objects. Under commodity production, “a definite social relation between men...assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx, 1977, p. 165). In this statement alone, Marx is attempting to capture the process by which the underlying dynamics of society—its “real” social relations”—are obscured. This does not mean that fetishism helps to produce a “false consciousness” that can be easily corrected through ideological realignment but instead that it generates a distorted picture of the world that is based on the very real experiences of exploitation and alienation suffered by workers under capitalism.

There are five consequences of commodity fetishism that are worth considering briefly.

First, fetishism *naturalizes* the whole process of commodification. What happens, according to Taussig, is that “an ether of naturalness conceals and enshrouds human social organization” (Taussig, 1980, p. 32). The beauty of the market is that it makes the valuing of objects above ordinary social relations seem so normal and an example of “common sense”. How we could do things otherwise? Why would we want to change something so “fantastic” as a consumer society predicated on the mass circulation of commodities? Fetishism is a crucial ingredient in the securing of consent to marketized social relations.

Second, when we focus on external objects at the expense of privileging our own agency, we run the risk of decontextualizing social relations: the meaning lies in the “thing” itself as opposed to the circumstances in which it was produced or the networks of relationships between the producers. What is then lost is not simply the

context of social interactions but the prospect of a “totality” from which it is possible to assess and react coherently to events as they happen. Instead, social life becomes stripped of its central dynamics and fragmented. According to Jakubowski, this is one of the most important consequences of commodity fetishism in that it not only naturalizes market relations but insulates its transactions from any overarching logic.

The social division of labour creates a series of special sub-spheres, not only in the economy but in the whole of social life and thought. They develop their own autonomous sets of laws. As a result of specialisation, each individual sphere develops according to the logic of its own specific object. (Jakubowski, 1976, p. 95)

This connects to the third consequence: the *objectification* of social life or, if you want to put it a little more crudely, the *thingification* of social relations and processes more generally. Georg Lukacs was rather more elegant when he talked of the phenomenon of “reification”, of the act of characterizing relations between people as “thing-like”. He argued that under conditions of market exchange, social relationships acquire a “phantom objectivity”, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” (Lukacs, 1971, p. 83). Under capitalism, commodity fetishism leads to the experience of reification in which individuals are atomized and their relationships rationalized and bureaucratized.

This, in turn, intensifies the alienation of ordinary people as they bear witness to the ongoing commodification of virtually the entire realm of social life that

includes, of course, the commodification of their own labour power. For Istvan Meszaros (1975, p. 35), alienation is

characterised by the universal extension of “saleability” (i.e. the transformation of everything into commodity); by the conversion of human beings into “things” so that they could appear as commodities on the market (in other words: the “reification” of human relations), and by the fragmentation of the social body into “isolated individuals” who pursue their own limited, particularistic aims.

Reification, therefore, is a consequence of a commodified society in which individuals lose a sense of their collective power and identity further increasing their disempowerment. Reification is not an experience that is unique to capitalism but its impacts are uniquely disastrous given the scale and intensity of commodity fetishism in market relations; only under capitalism can reification “penetrate society in all its aspects and...remould it in its own image” (Lukacs, 1971, p. 85).

The fourth feature is that, through fetishism, the dynamics of the social world are mystified and made “spectral”. Commodity fetishism, according to Mike Wayne (2003, p. 194), “represents, rubs away and dematerialises the social relations of an activity or commodity and just leaves us with its physical materiality, isolated or with its interdependence with everything else fading away.” Social processes start to have a ghost-like appearance: we think we see them for what they are but they have a life of their own, independent of their own creators. For Jakubowski, it is in “capitalist commodity production alone that the false appearance is a general phenomenon” (1971, p. 90), leading not simply to the reification of social relations but the

systematic distortion of the lens through which we view the world around us.

Similarly, Lefebvre (1968, p. 47) argues that the “commodity form possesses the peculiar capacity of concealing its own essence and origin from the human beings who live with it and by it. The form is fetishized. It appears to be a thing endowed with boundless powers.” Bauman contends that this is a phenomenon that is not restricted simply to production but also to consumption where what he describes as a “subjectivity fetishism” hides the “all too commoditized reality of the society of *consumers*” (Bauman, 2007, p. 14).

Finally—and rather central to the topic of this article—this process of concealing material relations through the “objectification” of social life takes a particular form in commodity production through the creation of law and legal controls. “Under capitalism”, argues Jakubowski (1976, p. 94), “the generality of legal form, the displacement of all organic, traditional relationships by “rational”, legally regulated ones, is an expression of reification.” Market relations have obscured human interactions as the source of wealth and instead privileged principles of “objectivity” and “rationality” through a series of highly regulated relationships that are embedded in law and expressed as policies.

Media policy and commodity fetishism

How does all of this relate to the development of instruments of media law and policy? I would argue that the features of commodity fetishism outlined above are relevant both to commodities as tangible objects as well as to social interactions and political processes in which the interplay between individuals is displaced and instead in which these processes are seen as autonomous, independent and rational. It relates

to what many people perceive as our loss of control over politics and policymaking—that it appears as a process that is utterly separate to us and fully reified—as part of a wider expression of political disengagement (Hay, 2007).

This alienation from decision-making processes is especially noticeable in relation to media and communications practices that, after all, dominate so much of our waking lives. The average British person, for example, spends at least eight hours per day on communicative activity (Ofcom, 2013, p. 29) while a study for the mobile phone company O2 found that we spend far more time with our smartphones than with our partners (O2, 2013). Our lives are increasingly taken up with mediated interaction but we appear to have very little connection to or involvement in the policy debates that structure our communicative environment.

In part this is simply due to busy lives, the perception that policy environments require a level of expertise and resources that are simply out of the question for most citizens, and an instinct that the efforts of “outsiders” will be ignored. Yet even for many civil society activists and academics who take media policy debates very seriously, there is often a “spectral” quality to media policy – a “phantom objectivity” (as Lukacs put it earlier) that is attached to it. Speaking from the perspective of a media reform activist, I know I am involved in “media policy” (I receive the invitations to attend seminars and to offer submissions, to comment and critique) but the process itself feels far from tangible. Access to the core of the decision-making process always seems out of reach, shaped by external forces that are often neither present nor accountable. Yet at the end of the process, policies are then communicated to “stakeholders” as eminently sensible, scientific and rational responses to the given policy “problem”. Perhaps this “spectral quality” reflects the fact that, in a market environment, there is a slight defensiveness to the very existence

of media policies because, in reality, we should not really need them: broadband networks should build themselves, traffic should manage itself, parents can switch off the TV or turn on the filter, and editors are free to regulate their own behaviour. Media policy, in other words, is always trying to remove traces of itself – which is, of course, precisely what the state attempts to do under neoliberalism: to use its power to rub itself out, to make itself invisible (Mirowski, 2013).

So what might be some of the features of this rather ghostly policy process? How might a concept of “policy fetishism” shape the dynamics of media policymaking? I want to mention five ways in which fetishism can be invoked in an analysis of the media policy process.

The first dimension involves the evacuation of the meaning of key policy principles. Napoli (2001), author removed (2008) and Karppinen (2012) have all attempted to trace the genealogy of core policy concepts like pluralism, diversity, freedom and the public interest but all too often these terms are actually used in ways that distort their intended purposes. Just as Marx argues that exchange value trumps use value in the circulation of commodities, guiding principles that were designed to foster communicative equality are regularly deployed to protect corporate and elite interests. Freed from the contexts in which they were originally developed and mobilized by those in positions of power, they “appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own” (Marx, 1977, p. 165) that is often in tension with their original meaning. For example, the tortured but nevertheless crucial notion of the public interest is all too often seen simply in terms of the satisfaction of the public’s appetite as opposed to a notion of the “common good”. This was most famously articulated by former FCC chairman Mark Fowler in the early 1980s when he argued that the “public’s interest...defines the public interest” (Fowler and

Brenner, 1982, pp. 3-4). This is a bit like saying that the state of public health ought to be measured simply by what the public actually consumes as distinct from any issues of nutritional value. We can see this evacuation of meaning taking place today in relation to ongoing debates concerning media pluralism and press freedom.

Pluralism—the European policy framework for what US policymakers call diversity—is supposed to be a foundational principle that does two things: first, to provide citizens with a full range of information and second to break up undue concentrations of power (Ofcom, 2012, p. 1). But recent policy debates have been dominated by a commitment to secure pluralism that sees it not in terms of the equitable distribution of media power but as related to the promotion of consumer choice: of making the menu a little longer but not really looking at what is on the menu itself. Indeed, while there is a formal acknowledgement of its responsibility to promote diversity of expression, the UK government is quick to insist that “neither the Government nor any other body can compel people to consume a range of media voices, or control the impact that these voices have on public opinion” (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2014, p. 9). In a situation in which three companies control 70 per cent of daily newspaper circulation, a single news wholesaler provides bulletins for the vast majority of commercial radio stations and a single company dominates pay TV (Media Reform Coalition, 2014), the government has neutralized pluralism policy by rejecting “remedies” in favour of the “need to remain nimble in the face of great change” (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2014, p. 23). In the US, the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the organization that is responsible for securing competition, localism and viewpoint diversity in the communications sector, is a former cable industry lobbyist who is now leading the FCC’s review into the proposed merger of cable giants Comcast and Time

Warner Cable. Pluralism, at least in its execution, is to be presided over by interests that are very distant from the publics to which the policy objective ought to be accountable.

There is a similar evisceration of the meaning of press freedom where, at least in the UK, there is a fierce—and thus far highly effective—backlash against government proposals for a new Royal Charter on press self-regulation led by newspapers claiming that they are the *only* guarantors of press freedom. This is despite the fact that it was their activities—the industrial scale of phone hacking, the privileged access of proprietors to politicians, and the press’ refusal to tolerate any kind of independent audit of its activities (Davies, 2014)—that have so massively lowered the credibility of many news organizations in the public’s eyes.

So to take a fairly typical example, one leading commentator used his column in the *Mail on Sunday* to insist that the proposed Charter would “bury three centuries of press freedom” (Nelson, 2013). Yet the article failed to provide a single example of how an oversight body of a self-regulator with no remit whatsoever to impose restraints on journalists would be able, single-handedly, to tame what its supporters regularly describe as a “raucous” press. Another commentator railed against the “chilling effect” of proposals for independent self-regulation and called as witnesses to her campaign against “illiberal state licensing of newspapers” (Fox, 2013) such notables as John Stuart Mill, John Milton and even Karl Marx while totally ignoring the fact that we live in very different historical circumstances from those campaigners for a free press. Today, the most restrictive influence on journalists is generally not the pre-publication censorship of previous eras so much as the commercial imperative to secure exclusives and increase circulation whatever the ethical consequences. Where journalists do face overt state intervention—often concerning security-related

issues—many proprietors and editors are suddenly less keen to prioritize “press freedom” over the “national interest” as demonstrated by the *Sun*’s accusation that the *Guardian* newspaper had committed “treason” simply for publishing Edward Snowden’s revelations about the scale of US and UK government surveillance (Liddle, 2013). The definition and deployment of key media policy principles is hegemonized in both these examples by a small circle of powerful insiders.

The second dimension of media policy fetishism refers to the obsession with evidence and metrics inside the policy process. This is absolutely key to contemporary policymaking: if you do not have the facts and if you do not arrive with the data, then your argument is immediately devalued. Now I have no wish to dismiss the importance of evidence or to suggest that policy should somehow deride data, but I would simply wish to warn of the dangers of the “phantom objectivity” that is guiding a very subjective process. Facts are important but an “evidence-led” approach in itself is far from objective: just think back to the FCC’s rather discredited “Diversity Index” or indeed the disputes involving the FCC about which reports on media ownership to commission, who to commission them from and indeed which reports to publicize and which ones to hide (author removed, 2008).

Yet quantitative data remains very much the “gold standard” of media policymaking despite the fact that policymakers “rely heavily on the datasets developed by commercial data providers for their clients and the investment community” (Napoli and Karaganis, 2007, p. 56) and not by public interest advocates. Indeed, such is the fetish for numbers that the UK government continues to delay any meaningful action to address a lack of pluralism until it has received from the regulator “a suitable set of indicators to inform the measurement framework for media plurality” (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2014, p. 7). The policy “problem”

is here defined not as an issue of concentrated media power but of the need to secure reliable numbers in an illustration of Jakubowski's claim that positivism and empiricism "are characteristic of reified thought. The "facts" are torn out of their total context and reappear as the object of knowledge in their own right" (Jakubowski, 1976, pp. 96-97).

Third, policy fetishism also means that instead of having a genuine debate in which a diverse group of citizens collectively set the terms of debate and decide the agenda, the process is characterized by objectives that are largely taken for granted: for example, the intrinsic desirability of digital switchover or tougher enforcement of intellectual property rules or liberalisation of ownership restrictions. This is not to suggest that these objectives are necessarily undesirable in all circumstances but simply that the impact and benefits of many policy debates are rarely, if ever, discussed with the people whose lives they are supposed to transform (Dragomir and Thompson, 2014, p. 15). Nor, however, is it meant to suggest that policies are simply or mechanically imposed from above on a meek and vulnerable public but that fetishism refers to a set of social relations that are "lived" by ordinary people and regulated through the agenda-setting activities of experts, administrators and elites.

The leads to a fourth dimension of policy fetishism: the lack of public participation in the process as a whole. Indeed, how do you take part in a process that seems so remote and indifferent to your contribution? According to Lukacs, reification reinforces our sense of confusion and our inability to shape the world around us: "The personality can do no more than look on helplessly while its own existence is reduced to an isolated particle fed into an alien system" (1971, p. 90). So, for example, where are the access points and the invitations to participate in the media policy process? How many "town hall" events and and public hearings are open to

engaged citizens (as distinct to the people who Comcast once paid to pack a meeting on net neutrality in 2008 [Stein, 2008])? All too often, entrance into the official policy process is by “invitation only” and opportunities for public participation largely consist of responding to government consultations on questions that have already been posed and on objectives already fixed. Indeed, public participation in the process is sometimes seen as unhelpful, partisan and ill-informed as revealed by a senior FCC official when reflecting on public input into proposals to liberalize media ownership rules back in 2002.

Agencies have to make decision based on the facts and it's not terribly helpful to ask the average person “what do you think of this” because they will give you an overly simplistic answer. It's not their fault but they can't possibly know all the stuff that goes into making those decisions. (Quoted in author removed, 2008, p. 103).

The final aspect of policy fetishism I want to discuss lies in its ability to disguise the process itself: that we as citizens bestow decision-making power to an external force and, in doing so, to largely forget about our own investment in the situation. This is of course central to the ability of a narrow group of policymakers to be able to continue to dominate the process given that citizens, should they ever have the power to shape the policy agenda, might well have a different set of concerns beyond those of profitability, efficiency and state security. Fetishism helps to explain how we are prepared to “outsource” decisions about the shape of our media world to a process over which we have little control and little knowledge thus endowing established policymakers with a credibility and rationality that is far from deserved.

Sometimes the consequences of doing this hit home, for example when we realise that we are being surveilled, or that we no longer have a choice of cable providers or that our media simply fail closely enough to resemble “us”—understood as diverse and overlapping collectivities—and are prepared to do something about it. These moments are crucial (as I discuss below) but, for most of the time, media policymaking appears to be an activity that takes place on a distant galaxy.

Is it possible to “liberate ourselves from fetishism”?

The whole point of fetishism is that it disconnects publics from the true source of power and creativity in society so that we need to find a way of reconnecting ourselves to the capacity for change. One of the great strengths of Marx’s analysis was his insistence that, however durable and comprehensive commodity production may be, capitalism is nevertheless riddled with crises and contradictions (for example between use and exchange value or between the collective aspect of labour and its privatized appropriation) that simultaneously renders it unstable. Fetishism suggests mystery and transcendence but it is, at the same time, destructive, alienating and unsettling. In highlighting the process by which we cede control over the systems that we otherwise ought to shape, an understanding of fetishism can also suggest a way forward. “The task before us”, argues Taussig (1980, pp. 5-6), is “to liberate ourselves from the fetishism and phantom objectivity with which society obscures itself, to take issue with the ether of naturalness that confuses and disguises social relations.” There are three ways in which we might want to achieve this in relation to media policy.

The first is methodological: that we should not insulate questions of policy from those of content and creative practice and from the spaces of media institutions

and flows. The artificial separation that we often see in academia between media policy on the one hand and media production and consumption on the other weakens all of us. The aesthetic strategies, creative endeavours and forms of resistance that may or may not be present in popular, everyday communication are critically related to the wider structural contexts of media environments in which certain types of behaviour and certain political preferences are rewarded or marginalized. The ability not simply to talk “truth to power” but to represent the voices of ordinary people, to speak in dialect, to open up conversations that others do not want to open up, to reflect the way a society is headed—all these are dependent on the policy choices debated and enacted in any contemporary mediated society.

The second approach is to advocate ways in which to reconnect media policy to the publics on whose basis it is supposed to be enacted. In part this can be achieved through the work of specific media reform movements that have sought not simply to overturn existing policy approaches but to involve publics more broadly inside this process. Campaigns such as OpenMedia.ca’s “Stop the Squeeze” initiative against the domination of Canadian wireless by three giant companies, the more than one million signatures gathered by activist groups in the US in 2014 calling on the FCC to reintroduce Net Neutrality rules or the mass online campaigns in recent years against ACTA in Europe and SOPA in North America are all important means through which to restore the agency of citizens in relation to decision-making processes.

This re-connection, however, is not exclusively the domain of media reformers per se but of movements for social justice more generally. Demands for media reform are an increasingly familiar sight in democracy movements across the world – from Mexico, where student activists in *Yo Soy 132* challenged the duopoly of Televisa and TV Azteca (Abraham-Hamanoiel, forthcoming) as part of a wider

challenge to elite power, to Malaysia, where demands for the relaxation of media controls were part of that country’s electoral reform movement in 2012 (Hodal, 2012); and from Turkey, where the refusal of mainstream TV channels to cover the attacks on peaceful demonstrators in Gezi Park in 2013 led to protests outside broadcast outlets (Girit, 2013), to Greece where, also in 2013, the shutdown of the public service broadcaster in the name of austerity measures was met with an occupation of the broadcaster (Sarikakis, 2014) and a further questioning of the government’s austerity agenda.

Finally, there is a need to contest the domination of the media policy process by vested interests—whether in government or in corporate boardrooms—and to inculcate a policymaking culture driven by a radical (that is, an unreified) concept of the public interest and a commitment to participatory democracy. That will require not just more inclusive policy networks but a fundamental challenge to the power relations that underscore existing policymaking structures and agendas. The rejection of the ideological mystification supported by fetishism will involve battles fought not simply in the realm of ideology but of the material distribution of resources. It is an incredibly difficult task made more difficult by the incorporation of large sections of the media into precisely those power relations but nevertheless one in which ordinary viewers, listeners and users have a strategic democratic interest.

In the context of intensive commodity production, an alienated citizenry and an unaccountable decision-making process, we need an approach to media policy that is technologically informed but not deterministic; openly ideological as opposed to purely administrative; political as opposed to partisan; interested as opposed to disinterested; and committed to delivering social justice instead of serving the interests of either state or private elites. When we think about questions of ownership

or net neutrality or digital switchover or press freedom, we need to think of policy as both an empirical fact *and* an ideological tool: that it is both a means of solving a “problem” and an instrument with which to democratize and equalize our communicative environments. Media policy, in other words, needs to be considered in relation to media reform and social change. If we do so, we can try to transform media policy from being a fetish to be an instrument designed to deliver real pleasure: a media system run for our benefit and not for the pockets of moguls, the egos of politicians or the imperatives of governments.

References

Author removed (2008)

Author removed (2010)

Abraham-Hamanoiel, A. (forthcoming) A Perfect Storm for Media Reform: Activist Strategies and Socio-political Circumstances behind Telecommunication Reform in Mexico. In author removed (forthcoming).

Bauman, Z. (2007). *Consuming Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Dahl, R. (2005 [1961]). *Who Governs?: Democracy and Power in an American City*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Davies, N. (2014). *Hack Attack: How the Truth Caught Up with Rupert Murdoch*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Department of Culture, Media & Sport (2014). *Media Ownership & Plurality Consultation Report*, 6 August. London: DCMS.

Dragomir, M. and Thompson, M. (2014). Mapping the World's Digital Media. In M. Dragomir and M Thompson (eds) *Digital Journalism: Making News, Breaking News* (pp. 9-20). London: Open Society Foundations.

Fowler, M. and Brenner, R. (1982). A marketplace approach to broadcast regulation. *Texas Law Review* 60(2), 1-51.

Fox, C. (2013). Leveson has done his damnedest to encourage press regulation, despite his protestations. *Independent*, 11 October. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/leveson-has-done-his-damnedest-to-encourage-press-regulation-despite-his-protestations-8874676.html> (accessed August 2014).

Girit, S. (2013). Turkish Gezi Park protesters take on media. BBC News Online, 14 June. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-22914767> (accessed August 2014).

Hay, C. (2007). *Why We Hate Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Hodal, K. (2013). Malaysian police fire teargas at electoral reform protesters. *Guardian Online*, 28 April. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/28/malaysian-police-fire-teargas-protesters> (accessed August 2014).
- Hunt, J. (2012). Witness statement to Leveson Inquiry, 31 May. Available at: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140122145147/http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/JH-Witness-statement-MOD300005597.pdf> (accessed August 2014).
- Jakubowski, F. (1976). *Ideology and Superstructure in Historical Materialism*. London: Alison & Busby.
- Karppinen, K. (2012). *Rethinking Media Pluralism*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Kirkpatrick, B. (2013). Vernacular Policymaking and the Cultural Turn in Media Policy Studies. *Communication, Culture & Critique* 6, 634-647.
- Lefebvre, H. (1968). *The Sociology of Marx*. New York: Random House.
- Leveson, Lord Justice. (2012). *An inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press: report*. London: The Stationery Office.

Liddle, R. (2013). Guardian treason helping terrorists. *The Sun*, 10 October. Available at :

<http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/suncolumnists/rodliddle/5192001/Guardian-treason-is-helping-terrorists.html> (accessed August 2014).

Lukacs, G. (1971). *History and Class Consciousness: studies in Marxist dialectics*. London: Merlin.

Lukes, S. (2005 [1974]). *Power: A Radical View*, second edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Marx, K. (1977 [1867]). *Capital: Volume One*. New York: Vintage.

McChesney, R. (2003). *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the 21st Century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Media Reform Coalition, (2014). *The Elephant in the Room*. London: MRC.

Available at: <http://www.mediareform.org.uk/blog/the-elephant-in-the-room> (accessed August 2014).

Meszaros, I. (1975). *Marx's Theory of Alienation*. London: Merlin.

Miliband, R. (1969). *The State in Capitalist Society*. London: Camelot Press.

Mills, C.W. (1959). *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mirowski, P. (2013). *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go To Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*. London: Verso.

Napoli, P. (2001). *Foundations of Communications Policy*. Cresskill: Hampton Press.

Napoli, P. and Karaganis, J. (2007). Toward a federal data agenda for communications policymaking. *CommLaw Conspectus: The Journal of Communications Law & Policy* 16(1), 53-96.

Nelson, F. (2013). Vengeful MPs, their Monty Python Press Charter – and a lethal threat to free speech. *Mail on Sunday*, 13 October. Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2456926/Vengeful-MPs-Monty-Python-press-charter--lethal-threat-free-speech.html> (accessed August 2014).

O2 (2013). “I can’t talk dear, I’m on my phone”. Press release, 30 May. Available at: <http://news.o2.co.uk/?press-release=i-cant-talk-dear-im-on-my-phone> (accessed July 2014).

Ofcom (2012). *Measuring Media Plurality*. London: Ofcom.

Ofcom (2013). *Communications Market Review*. London: Ofcom.

Poulantzas, N. (1973). *Political Power and Social Classes*. London: New Left Books.

Sarikakis, K. (2014). Not Just a Local Drama. Media Reform Coalition, 8 January. Available at: <http://www.mediareform.org.uk/blog/local-drama> (accessed August 2014).

Seal, M. (2014). Seduced and Abandoned. *Vanity Fair*, March. Available at: <http://www.vanityfair.com/society/2014/03/wendi-deng-note-tony-blair> (accessed August 2014).

Stein, M. (2008). F.C.C. Chairman: Comcast ‘Packing’ No Big Deal. *Upstart Business Journal*, 5 March. Available at: <http://upstart.bizjournals.com/news/wire/2008/03/05/fcc-chairman-comcast-packing-no-big-deal.html> (accessed January 2015).

Taussig, M. (1980). *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Wayne, M. (2003). *Marxism and Media Studies: Key Concepts and Contemporary Trends*. London: Pluto.

Wintour, P. and Sabbagh, D. (2012) Jeremy Hunt clings on after Leveson inquiry ordeal. *The Guardian*, 1 June: 1.

Wyatt, E. (2014). Lobbying Surges Over Web Rules. *New York Times*, 25 April: A1.