MEDIA DIVERSITY AND PLURALISM

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Abstract

Media diversity constitutes one of the key objectives in the name of which arguments are made in both theoretical and political debates on media policy. As such, diversity and pluralism are foundational values that hardly anyone is opposed to. Opinions on the meaning and nature of these concepts are many though and they embody some of central conflicts in contemporary media policy. Respectively, the aspects and levels on which media diversity can be conceptualized have been subject to numerous analyses. The purpose of this paper, however, is neither to review them nor to offer new definitions. Instead, the article will follow Nikolas Rose's (1999: 29-30) claim that instead of analysing what concepts or words mean, it is sometimes more important to analyse what they do; what they make possible, the sentiments they mobilize, and the 'regimes of truth' they constitute. Consequently, my intention is not to seek the foundations of the concept of media diversity or to dwell on its possible definitions, but to locate some contradictions and lines of power in its current use.Based on the undisputed merits of social, political and cultural pluralism, diversity and variety in the media are desirable ends in themselves. But as McLennan (1995: 7) has noted, the constitutive vagueness of pluralism as a social value gives it enough ideological flexibility so that it is capable of signifying reactionary things in one phase of the debate and progressive things in the next. Similarly, in media policy the positive value of pluralism and diversity has been exploited in arguments for various and often incompatible objectives: for free competition as well as further public interventions and public service obligations. This ambiguity raises a question of whether media diversity in substance amounts to anything more than a fetished catch-phrase.The article aims to examine the contestation of media diversity as a political objective with a particular focus on how certain definitions and political rationalities become institutionalized and normalized in expert and policy discourses. The analysis is premised on the idea that the contestation of any ethico-political concepts can be analysed on many levels: (1) in normative and theoretical debates, (2) their political, strategic or rhetoric uses, or (3) on the level of implicit political ration alities and evaluation criteria that political considerations rely on. Each level implies a different mode of discourse, explicitly normative, political-strategic, or empirical-objective. While the explicit theoretical and political struggles are better covered in the existing

literature on media diversity, I will focus particularly on the third level of contestation, what I call 'the politics of criteria'. Drawing from the recent research into the role of ideas and concepts in public policy, it can be argued that the 'success' of political ideas and paradigms often rely, not on grand ideological clashes, but on their capability to become institutionalized and embedded in the norms, standard practices and calculations of policy-making (see Hay, 2004). This also implies an aim to illustrate how contested political ideas move from one domain to another, from theory to politics and further on to the informational practices of governance, and how they are transformed in the process. The first part of the paper will thus outline the rise of the diversity discourse in European media policy and attempt to expose some of its inherent contradictions and their political implications. Employing the notion of 'governmental technologies', the final part of the paper will then discuss some of the techniques used to stabilize, or de-contest, media diversity into a supposedly objective and reliable policy indicator, internalized by policy-makers and experts alike.Contestation of normative concepts as such is not foreign, or undesirable, to any sector of politics. The aspect of the diversity discourse that I want to focus on here is its technocratisation, i.e. attempts to bring closure to the political contestation in the name of empirical objectivity or expert knowledge. With increaseing inclination to develop empirical indicators to measure media diversity, the scholarly and policy discourse on media diversity has arguably shifted to more instrumental considerations and practices that link with the general trends of technocratisation and instrumental rationality in public policy. Even in itself, media diversity as a concept alludes to objectivity and neutrality that seem to transcend the dilemmas inherent in terms such as quality or social responsibility in assessing media performance. This makes it more compatible with both the needs of technocratic expert assessment and the broader ideology of anti-paternalism, pluralism and multiculturalism in media and cultural policy.Unfortunately, this inclusiveness also serves to veil political conflicts and antagonisms in media policy and often obscures the properly political or normative aspects of evaluating media performance and setting policy objectives. Thus, my paper is not an attempt to define but rather re-politicize and re-contest the concept of media diversity. After outlining the initial approach, the rationales, contradictions and political consequences of its different uses are discussed here especially in the context of regulatory objectives and evaluation criteria set for (public) broadcasting.