

Universities, Research and the Public Interest

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The major unifying thrust of William Melody's work has been the application of the tools of regulatory economics across a range of communication industries – particularly broadcasting and telecom. In contrast to the dominant trend in regulatory economics with its often simple-minded faith in the market, and associated narrow conception of market failure, Melody's work has been inspired by the school of institutional economics. True to the spirit of that school, and of its populist socio-political roots in North America, central to this work has been the search for and defence of the public interest and of the institutional forms and practices – in particular regulatory policies and agencies – that might deliver that public interest.

Any body of work that centrally mobilises the concept of public interest faces the problem of how and by whom the public interest is to be defined. This is particularly problematic for institutional economists like Melody because they reject the easy equation of the public interest with the maximisation of consumer welfare, defined as the aggregation of consumer demands through an undistorted market, and are at the same time fully aware of the extent to which both policy debate and regulatory practice can be manipulated by special interest groups. Moreover, if, like Melody's, the aim of regulatory analysis is broadly democratic and activist rather than merely critical, one faces the dilemma, long ago debated by Dewey and Lippman, about the necessary role of experts in what are technically complex policy fields. This dilemma must be faced in the full awareness that one of the key ways in which special interest groups exert power over policy and regulation is through their ability to mobilise, using the incentives of money or power, expert opinion.

It is this search for a locus of expert opinion that can be mobilised in the construction, propagation and defence of public interest policies in the field of communication that has led Melody to place a central emphasis on the role of university research. This has been evident both in his own move out of regulatory agencies and into academia and in his key role in the creation and direction of publicly funded, university-based research programmes and centres on information and communication policy in the United Kingdom, Australia, Denmark and The

Netherlands. In his own consultancy work from an academic base for such agencies as the International Telecommunication Union and the World Bank and in the design and running of these research programmes and centres the aim has been, on the one hand, to escape the taint of special interest pleading, while, on the other, avoiding the lure of academic ivory-towerism by ensuring that publicly-funded research takes on a public responsibility.

I want here to suggest that, while the dilemma is real and the aim laudatory, one has to ask whether university research can, if it ever could, any longer be seen as a source of disinterested public interest expertise, especially in the field of information and communication policy and regulation. Leaving to one side the general sociological question as to whether university-based researchers always represent a special, elite interest, I suggest that the current evolution of universities, and of the national policy frameworks within which they work, make it more and more quixotic to see university research as a way out of the public interest dilemma, especially with regard to information and communication policy. In writing from my experience in the United Kingdom, the trends seem to be general. While policy makers continue to pay lip service to the disinterested, critical and blue-sky nature of university research, in reality, such research is increasingly driven, in a competitive search for funds, either to seek corporate support with its associated research agenda, or public funds which are increasingly distributed, in the name of relevance and the supposed rights of tax payers, according to a politically-defined research agendas. This linkage between public funding and a politically-defined research agenda is, of course, particularly problematic where policy research is at issue. With particular relevance to information and communication policy, universities are now seen by governments, and to an extent by their management, as major corporate players in the so-called information or knowledge economy.

The incorporation of the university sector into the information economy agenda has two major effects. First, universities are seen as key producers of the human capital – the so-called knowledge workers – upon which national economic competitiveness and future economic growth are seen to depend. This is also often linked to a skills gap interpretation of inadequate rates of productivity growth and higher than necessary levels of unemployment. This view of the universities' role is having two major effects. It tends to make both the curriculum and the research agenda more narrowly pragmatic and 'vocational'. The properly critical element of university education and research gives way in the face of a corporate and government agenda and students are encouraged to see themselves primarily as clients whose investment pays off in terms of the job market. At the same time,

the laudable aim of extending access to higher education beyond a narrow social elite is justified, not in terms of widening choice and freedom and extending general capabilities, but in terms of avoiding training that would involve any wasting of economically valuable human capital.

Unfortunately, this extension of access comes up against two constraints. It misreads the labour market and thus tends to produce greater competition for supposedly graduate level jobs – which do not require the specialised technical skills claimed by the skills gap school, but rather the social skills which the older more elitist system was designed to filter. This then produces a hierarchy within the university system between elite and non-elite universities, since employers still want universities to bear the cost of doing their employment filtering for them. At the same time, it lowers the general economic returns to the personal investment in higher education, thus both threatening to create a disappointed body of graduates, and discouraging the more socially disadvantaged from pursuing a university education.

Second, it faces the unwillingness of governments to fund the expansion of access through taxation. This results in a general lowering of the quality of provision and in the creation of a hierarchy, not now between those with access to higher education and those excluded, but between students and between institutions within the overall system. It also results in a drive for productivity growth. This directly affects both teaching and research. As anyone who has either conducted or managed research will know, the most valuable resource is time. The less time there is, the more likely it is that the risks involved in the very uncertain outcomes of critical inquiry will be eschewed, in favour of incremental developments of the tried and tested. As anyone who has taught will know, the teaching which develops and expands critical intelligence is an intensive user of the time for both teacher and student.

But, of particular relevance to the field of information and communication policy, in the search for increased productivity, universities have turned, encouraged by government, to information and communication technologies – and, in particular, to the World Wide Web. The provision of higher education is, like all knowledge-based service businesses, labour intensive. Major productivity gains can only be achieved by extending reach. The highly trained and relatively scarce labour inputs required to design a syllabus and conduct lectures and seminars cannot be reduced. Put crudely the only way to increase productivity is to increase the audience, that is, the number of students in receipt of this scarce input. For over 50 years, a succession of technologies has been seen as the magic solution to this

dilemma of educational productivity, and therefore cost – radio, then television, then computers, and now the Web. Each, in its turn, failed to deliver the goods. Indeed, while in each case these technologies may have had the potential to enhance learning, they could only do so at extra cost – a cost that funders were unable or unwilling to sustain. This leads not just to disappointment, but to the cruel disappointment of wasted effort and hopes dashed.

There seems to be no good reason why the virtual university will not go through the same experience. Indeed, the first wave of initiatives has disenchanted with unusual swiftness. Moreover, this pursuit of virtuality is combined with a global vision linked to the much-vaunted supposed distance destroying capabilities of the Web. From this policy perspective, national universities are seen, not as institutions designed to widen and deepen the intellectual and cultural capabilities, and thus autonomy, of citizens in the general public interest, but as potentially global knowledge businesses competing for a share of a global education market. Universities are expected to compete both with the universities of other developed nations and with corporate providers of higher level training. Such developments threaten reduced intellectual and cultural diversity on a global scale. They are already shifting the power structure within universities from the collegial, based on free debate and intellectual openness, to the managerial, based on a corporate model of labour relations and, crucially, intellectual property ownership.

In general, these developments undermine universities as a base for critical, public interest policy research. But more specifically, to the extent that universities become locked into the logic of such a development and become major players in the information society policy game, they will hardly be neutral on either macro matters of information society policy, for instance, and perhaps most urgently, criticising its very logic – or matters of infrastructure planning, pricing and access.