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Global Media and Cultural Diversity

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INTRODUCTION

William Melody is best known for his work on telecom reform. While his commitment in the broadcasting field has been more sporadic and his writings less numerous, they nevertheless have been significant and remain deeply inspiring for scholars in the field. Reading his material again quickly convinced me that Melody addressed most of the major issues that are still relevant today to the analysis of broadcasting policy. His institutional approach is as appropriate as ever to diagnose the problems and to put forward thoughtful solutions.

My purpose in this contribution is to illustrate how Melody's definitions of problems and theoretical and methodological choices with respect to the analysis of broadcasting policies more than ten years ago remain pertinent to current studies. I cannot put aside my personal understanding of Melody's thought and I must extrapolate from his writings in order to render a 'Melodian' interpretation of contemporary issues.

The main concern of our times regarding broadcasting, and more broadly, the exchange of cultural products and services at the international level, is what type of system should govern their world-wide circulation. Melody (1978; 1988) and Cave and Melody (1989) addressed these questions through the lens of international television and the implications of European satellites and the regulatory issues that these developments raised. Refusing the mechanical solutions of neo-liberalism, Melody sought answers by applying the principles of a classic institutional approach. In his view, the rule of the market helps to escape the heavy weight of vested interests and stimulates innovation. However, markets are but social institutions and political intervention is required to guarantee equal access and real competition, among other aims.

The questions I want to discuss from a 'Melodian' perspective include: How can we preserve cultural diversity while opening markets to encourage technological innovation and stimulate commercial exchanges? What is the right balance between political intervention and market rules?

MARKETS, TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION AND POLITICAL INTERVENTION

In his early work, Melody (1978) argued for the necessity to preserve individual freedom of speech and diversity of sources of information through: 1) competition within and between the media; and 2) specific rights of individual access to the media. Since the end of the 1970s the distribution facilities of cable and satellite have hugely increased and the number of radio and television channels has soared.

Technological innovation has opened wide avenues and created new opportunities, and scarcity is no longer the predominant characteristic of audio-visual markets. Has this fundamentally changed the fact that in a *laissez-faire* marketplace 'the inherited conditions will differ among the different participants?' Given these conditions, then 'if the international economic system is to operate to the mutual advantage of all trading nations, it may be necessary to establish certain terms of trade that to some countries will be restrictions' (Melody 1978: 220).

Freedom is at the core of Melody's thinking in this area. And open markets provide the arena where various initiatives can compete in their search to meet consumer demand. However, to guarantee real freedom to everyone, Melody is ready to accept, and even proposes imposing constraints on market functioning in certain circumstances and sectors. 'In the broadcast industries in particular, certain regulatory functions cannot be totally eliminated' (Cave and Melody 1989: 224), even if critics rightly recognise that the regulatory bodies often tend to share the interests of the industry they regulate.

Some believe that fibre optic cables, satellite distribution and the Internet now provide equal access to the means of expression that democracy requires. But many statistics show this to be wishful thinking. While these technologies are more and more available, individual and collective inequalities remain regarding access to and the use of cable and satellite services or the Internet. The distribution of computers among various social classes and nations reveals large discrepancies.

In short, if technological development offers opportunities for social innovation and markets provide the best mechanism to challenge vested interests, social equality must be addressed at the political level. But what kind of regulation is needed and is desirable? The answer of course varies from time to time and from place to place. One way to assess this question is to consider the supply and demand for regulation, following the work of Stigler (1971). Another is to undertake comparative analysis. Melody has used both approaches in his work.

GLOBALISATION AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

If broadcasting systems are designed and operated so as to ensure social equality, they are also often expected to work in such a manner as to achieve cultural objectives. Melody (1988: 270) addressed this in discussing the future of satellite television in Europe.

Will global television programming help overcome nationalist programming differences and lead to programming designed to unite us all by emphasising cross-national common cultural values and the flowering of diversity? Or will it lead to programming designed to serve an artificial bland, homogeneous set of values that represent no one and offend no one, that is, a destruction of diversity to serve only the lowest common denominator?

His answer deserves an extensive quotation.

If the objective is to promote pan-European broadcasting specifically directed to common European interests, the more restrictive model may be more appropriate. The EEC proposal of minimal regulation does not really promote pan-European Television. It promotes global television. The dominant source of programming will be almost certainly the US, and programme production by European producers and broadcasters will be directed not to common European themes, issues and values, but to those of the competitive, commercial global market. There is nothing uniquely European about it, as a casual observation of current pan-European television quickly demonstrates. Under the model of more restrictive regulation, the programming is much more likely to reflect the claimed objective of promoting television programming with a common European cultural dimension (Melody 1988: 276).

The challenge remains the same at the beginning of the third millennium. Free trade agreements and on-going discussion at the World Trade Organization are pushing towards more liberalisation, including the cultural sector. Cultural exchanges, like economic exchanges, are stimulating and should be promoted. But the main danger still lies in the hegemony of a few dominant actors controlling the production and distribution of the most significant part of cultural products.

Global culture is following the path opened by economic globalisation. It usually evokes superficial consumer products, and is often perceived as a threat to national and local cultures. The acceptance of universal individual and collective

rights could be seen as a positive outcome of the globalisation process. If the universalisation of human rights is to be promoted, it appears to most experts that cultural diversity is a collective heritage that must also be protected.

Culture is vital to democratic life where the major arena remains the nation state. Democracy is 'government for the people by the people', as represented in popular texts. It is a 'one man, one vote' formula. But true democracy must also include 'one person, one voice'. And to achieve that, a society must care about its cultural and communication system in order to guarantee equality in access to information and the possibility of expression. This is true for news and for norms and values, and opinions and ideas.

Culture is as essential to the survival of a society as a military system of defence or the security of agricultural provision. Culture is at the core of social solidarity. People must agree on norms and values, and share feelings, models and ideals, in order to live together. To play their role as social mediators, artists and creators of all kinds should be deeply connected to their community.

However, it has to be recognised, at the same time, that cultural vitality also depends on contacts with other cultures. Interchanges should be encouraged to maintain the dynamism of different cultures. In this respect, to ensure cultural development, openness is as much needed as protection.

For the culture and communication sectors, the State must intervene to guarantee equality of access, artistic freedom, education of the public, heritage protection and the connections between the creators and their community. The policy instruments developed by the Welfare State do need to be submitted to reassessment and new tools, more appropriate to the new context, should be invented. In the Age of the Internet and modern electronic networks, content quotas are no longer very effective measures to protect and promote local and national cultural products. A new system is required.

In a global world, regulation at the national level is no longer sufficient. Regulation at the international level is increasingly needed. From an economic perspective, it is accepted that States must agree to rules that guarantee conditions for fair competition. States should also play a similar role in the cultural field to preserve conditions for content diversity. This should be considered a basic requirement which is as important to cultural development as antitrust legislation is to economic competition.

The main question may be summarised as follows: if culture, information and education cannot be reduced to mere commodities, how can international exchanges be regulated in order to allow as much free trade as possible while, at the same time, protecting and fostering cultural identities in a pluralistic world? It is essential to establish another point of reference than the market to assess the value of a cultural product. It is equally important that a new regulatory system at the international level takes this complimentary reference point into account.

Unfortunately, we do not know much about the dynamics of cultural development and this makes it difficult to specify exactly how this can be achieved. More research is clearly needed, and such research should take into account the basic characteristics of culture. Fundamentally, even for commercial products, culture is meaning expressed through shared symbols.

There are three basic policy options: promoting free trade applied equally to cultural commodities; creating a clear distinction between culture and commerce; and, giving specific recognition to the peculiarities of the cultural industries and adopting an adapted regime which, at the same time, respects the cultural and commercial objectives of these industries. The first option does not recognise the nature of culture. Given the complexities of reality, the second seems impossible to achieve. The third option then should be pursued through compromises that take into account the many contradictions involved in regulation to achieve protection and openness, competition and social cohesion, exchange value and use value, and commodity production with a variety of meanings.

CONCLUSION

William Melody is a citizen of the world. He has lived and worked in many countries located in different continents: Australia, Canada, Denmark, the United Kingdom, The Netherlands, and the United States. He has had the opportunity to gather the information needed to develop a comprehensive understanding of various communication systems and societies. He has been very well equipped to conduct comparative research and he has put it into action, in many cases, including the broadcasting field. Comparative analysis is central for researchers who adopt an institutional approach. If institutions matter, their social and cultural differences must be taken into account in social scientific studies as well as in political strategies. Cave and Melody's 1989 article comparing the British, Canadian and American regulatory systems is a model for students in the field.

Historical and comparative approaches are equally seminal for an understanding of social, economic and cultural phenomena. Historical analysis provides us with

insights into the uniqueness of every society and with a certain sense of necessity. Comparisons give us insight into the relativity of things and allow us to highlight the real similarities and real differences.

Cultural diversity is certainly a largely shared value. But it is understood in various ways and it does not have the same meaning in Canada, Europe, Brazil, the Middle East or China. It is the academic community's duty to contribute to a better understanding between people and comparative research is a good way to achieve this. Furthermore, the outcomes of such research can also help political leaders in their efforts to find the most workable solutions to the need to balance the goals of economic efficiency, social justice and cultural expression.