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**Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone:  
*Media Regulation.  
Governance and the Interest of Citizens and Consumers.*  
London: Sage, 2012**

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MedieKultur 2014, 57, 218-221

Published by SMID | Society of Media researchers In Denmark | [www.smid.dk](http://www.smid.dk)

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With *Media Regulation*, Lunt and Livingstone have provided an important, relevant and well-researched contribution to the debate about media regulation in the UK. Taking the Communications Act 2003 as a point of departure, the book examines New Labour's discourse on 'better regulation' as it unfolds in the area of media and communication policy. The wider question explored by the book is whether and under which conditions media can be regulated in a globalised and technologically fast-developing context. It also raises the issue of the changing role played by public service media. If public service is about ensuring the public good, the pertinent question becomes: What is the public good and who defines it? *Media Regulation* gives us a central argument that discusses precisely such issues.

The book's concern is the Office of Communication, Ofcom, which emerged out of the 2003 Act as a prime example of an innovative institutional design in media regulation. Ofcom has regulatory authority, is independent of government (and, thus, of political control), and is designed to co-ordinate the interests of different stakeholders. Dubbed by Tory politicians as one of the numerous bureaucratic and unaccountable New Labour *quangos* (or quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations), the institutional design of Ofcom reflects wider trends and developments in regulation and governance in the UK and elsewhere. Ofcom is also part of a political tendency that can be attributed to the UK New Labour attempt to relocate the Labour movement ideologically and recast it both politically and rhetorically farther towards the middle of the political spectrum (Giddens,

1998). Within this context, Lunt and Livingstone take issue with the development of the term coined by New Labour as 'better regulation' and analyse convincingly what is at stake when, for instance, public service media is under pressure from commercial forces and from the advance of online media platforms. Thus, media governance is placed between neo-liberal and social democratic policies in the analysis of how Ofcom both contributes to and challenges deregulation policies. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that Ofcom is the target of political controversy.

The role of the media is of particular interest thanks to its many-faceted democratic function in society. There is, therefore, a need to deal with questions such as how and why media systems work in the public sphere and whether the media play a role in ensuring the public good. The authors take Habermas' later concept of the public sphere as a point of departure for exploring how institutions of media regulation contribute not so much towards producing consensus but, instead, towards engaging public opinion in a deliberative democratic process. In order to analyse Ofcom as a legitimate player in this democratic process, the authors ask whether Ofcom can recognise issues that are of public concern as well as reflect on its own (institutional and political) interests in such issues vis-à-vis the public interest and citizens' right to self-determination (p. 10).

This approach allows Lunt and Livingstone to argue that Ofcom has a role to play as a governance institution in the public sphere in interpreting the idea of the public as consumers and/or citizens. The central argument is that Ofcom operates in a balance between seeing the public as media consumers and seeing them as citizens. The authors claim, however, that Ofcom has a tendency to promote interpretations that favour a more market-oriented consumer perspective over a democratic concern for citizen interests. Media are, thus, increasingly seen as commodities. This argument is supported by the book's case studies on the governance of public service broadcasting, media literacy, the regulation of advertising directed towards children and community radio.

As illustrated in the case studies, Ofcom's role in engaging citizens is rather limited. As a media regulator, Ofcom seeks to play a role in articulating what the public interest should be *on behalf of* the citizen-consumer it represents. Lunt and Livingstone's central question of whether Ofcom has contributed to advancing the public interest indicates that the authors seem unwilling to abandon the notion of *the* Public Interest as a unitary principle, as something *out there*, to which Ofcom can operate in relation. If, however, we take the book's very convincing central argument seriously – that much of Ofcom's activity is born out of an attempt to articulate the public interest as existing somewhere between citizens' and consumers' concerns, it seems more credible that the public interest is the sum of how powerful institutions in society articulate this very interest. In this way, a tension appears between the authors' theoretical framework and the book's central argument.

The theoretical shift from government to governance is important for the overall argument of the book; and the authors, convincingly, challenge a notion of centralised, top-down government (p. 18). Without drawing directly on the literature on governance

networks (e.g., Bevir and Rhodes, 2003), *Media Regulation* shows how Ofcom operates in complex networks within media policy when it interacts with commercial and political stakeholders (e.g., p. 118).

Such governance networks have been criticised as being characterised by a democratic deficit and the exclusion of particular marginalised interests in the governance process (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007). In many ways, *Media Regulation* could be seen as a contribution to this discussion. However, from this perspective, a point of concern for the book is, again, that it depicts citizens/consumers as relatively passive media recipients, taking on the role of readers and viewers of media messages. Moreover, citizens are also constituted as more or less (indirect) objects of media regulation. Considering the book's focus on citizens and consumer interests, these are relatively absent as social actors in the research.

However, the case studies bring more nuance to the discussion. The case study on media literacy, for instance, critically examines how discussions and definitions of media literacy are cast in the tension between protecting individuals against the potential risks of new media and empowering citizens who actively participate in a digitally-mediated society. 'Digital citizenship' provides a possible stepping stone to how citizens could engage with media and, thus, materialize as 'citizens' in actual practices rather than having the term 'citizen' simply become a 'tag' or a role assigned to them by regulators and other elite stakeholders speaking on behalf of the public in media and communication policy (p. 118). In a discussion of the role played by media literacy, the authors show that active citizenship, cast in terms of emancipation, is a complex matter – particularly, in the light of various deregulatory tendencies such as co- and self-regulation, consumer choice, etc. (p. 130).

*Media Regulation* is of particular relevance to students, researchers and practitioners with an interest in the British media regulation system due to its detailed analysis of Ofcom in particular. However, as more general themes and developments are studied, it will also be of interest to those concerned with how media and communication systems develop in other regions. Thus, the relatively UK-centred analysis of media regulation is not really a problem for the book. It is, however, helpful when the case study on media literacy places the UK regulatory regime in a European and international context (p. 123).

To sum up, *Media Regulation's* strength lies, first of all, in its multifaceted and extremely convincing analysis of Ofcom as a regulatory institution in the UK context. The variety of case studies adds to the richness and balance of the arguments provided. Secondly, the book provides a more general analysis of modern-day media governance *per se*. It shows a sensitivity to how changing paradigms in media regulation have an effect on how media institutions and regulatory authorities interact to constitute modern-day media as both a consumer good and as a democratic tool in the public sphere.

## References

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