

Chapter 2

Equality – an ambiguous value

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In his chapter Denis McQuail departs from two dominant narratives of public communication, technology and human agency. While the first seems to be running ahead of purpose, the latter follows the ideal and goal of freedom. However, freedom and equality are ambiguous values, and may contradict one another. McQuail identifies a stream of inequalities along the road of public communication, from claims of cultural imperialism, ethnic and gender inequalities to knowledge gaps. He emphasizes the close relationship between equality, objectivity and truth. With regard to the public interest in media equality, he reminds us that media comprise cultural and material goods in themselves, and their distribution reflects divisions and inequalities in society. His conclusion is rather sober: Technologies enable voice, but not large audiences, and they turn every open communication space into a commercial opportunity. What remains necessary is public communication that has qualities of transparency, non-exploitation, reliability, diversity and relevance. (abstract written by the editor)

The concept of equality in respect of publication and media does not appear until quite recent times in any explicit sense, but rather as a corollary and extension of other ideas, especially that of freedom. The history of public communication can be written according to differing themes. One is the story of communication technology, enabling the production, dissemination and storage of all forms of expression (facts, ideas, art, religion and more) to increase at an exponential rate. More and more varied voices came to be heard and more people were reached. These remarks apply to the era of printing that lasted until the start of the twentieth century.

An alternative narrative tells of the human agency behind these developments – a story of successive claims to the right to publish in conflict, if need be, with religious and political forces of orthodoxy seeking to control and limit the means of publication. The story tells of a gradual extension of rights and possibilities in tandem with the extension of political rights in democratic forms of government. The leitmotiv is the ideal and goal of freedom, in all its aspects and for all – communities and nations as well as individuals. This can be seen in simple terms as a matter of increasing equality,

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despite differences of power, status and resources. It can also be seen as a reduction of inequality, but without fundamental change.

The essential nature of the equality at issue is not made explicit in either of these narratives, which probably reflects conventional ideas about progress and democracy current in the modern era. The expansion of publication possibilities increased the chance for all would-be voices to be heard and established communication access as a right of all citizens. The explosion of publication, coupled with other social changes, also made the output of print media available in diverse forms to all, thus providing greater equality of reception and more equal sharing in the benefits of communication, for whatever purpose. In the freedom narrative, the idea of equality was a powerful motivating force behind the removal of restrictions on publication and economic burdens that mainly affected the poorer classes.

New ideas about democracy and the sovereignty of the people entailed the belief that citizens should be free to form and express opinions, and for this there needed to be relevant information widely available to all. In a democratic society, there should be no privileged access to the means of public communication and barriers to participation for audiences should be removed, especially illiteracy and low levels of education.

The introduction of new (mass) media in the last century, especially those of film, radio and television, added a new dimension to the debate about freedom and democracy. For a start, the new media were (as a matter of public policy) not available to individuals in any practical sense. They typically involved large complex organizations, much capital financing and were far from equally available to different political or social movements or schools of thought. For the most part they were run according to market principles, which give no priority to freedom or equality, except in the sense that mass distribution created a certain equality amongst a large audience – a homogeneity of current ideas and information and cultural uniformity. The new popular press sought and obtained dissemination amongst a majority. Broadcasting, whether as radio or television, even more effectively reached most citizens with news and entertainment.

The resulting “mass society” of the early twentieth century, as characterised by C.W. Mills (1956), was in some sense a more equal, that is, undifferentiated society, whether desirable or not. This points to some of the ambiguities and inner tensions of the concept (discussed again below). The norm of equality is open to different interpretations. The ideal of press freedom brought equality in its train, but the pursuit of equality could entail diminished freedom for some as it can involve levelling down as well as levelling up. In addition, it implicitly values similarity over diversity, which has also been seen as an ideal to be pursued in publication.

The late stages of the era of “industrial media” (mass press and broadcasting) in the latter twentieth century, saw much attention given to the rise of new and influential systems of public communication. Although the predominant aim of most interventions by political authorities were in the direction of control and limitation of influence, the climate of the time was favourable to more reformist and public spirited efforts

to reduce the potential harm of mass media and stimulate the potential social and cultural benefits. This climate helped to stimulate and shape the efforts of research drawn to study this new social phenomenon.

Main strands of media equality research

Many strands of this research were guided by one or another form of attachment to the value of equality. Amongst the first such, arising out of the politics of the time, was a concern with the consequences of an emerging monopoly structure of the press, especially in the early home of much communication research, the USA. It was the wealthy and well connected that owned the press and directed its opinion-forming role, meaning a very unequal balance of access for other interests in society. It did not take much research to establish the extent of monopoly, but it was less easy to demonstrate how this resulted in the effects feared by critics. Some distorting effects of ownership on content could be demonstrated, but the next stage of effect, on public opinion, was more elusive.

A quite different early theme of research was into literacy, a key factor in creating a large audience equally able to receive and process diverse information and enjoy the culture of their society. This topic was initially pursued as a problem for mass education in developed societies, but after WWII there was a notable opening up of studies of development in the non-industrial world, with a strong emphasis on the role of communication in transmitting the many “messages for development”. This was not only a matter of teaching new techniques for agriculture, but also of trying to transmit the values and practices of democracy. The central aim of the early phase of development research was primarily concerned with “levelling up” and reducing the vast differences of wealth, power and quality of life of “traditional” societies.

One feature of this enterprise was the attention given to the flow of news across frontiers (and also within frontiers). At first this was a matter of inventarising the great inequalities in the flow of news internationally. The international news agencies were in the hands of a few powerful nations and they saw as their task to inform their own publics according to national interests and relevance. The surplus could be sold off at low prices to any foreign media operator. Such news was essentially second hand and of less value for purpose. News of foreign parts reaching metropolitan audiences was typically fragmentary and distorted.

The overall result was characterised as one of stark imbalance of flow and as a reinforcement of a dependent relationship. The media publics (very limited in extent) of the “Third World” received little news of relevance to their own circumstances and the richer nations in their turn received very limited news about the Developing World and what there was, was distorted or unbalanced in various ways, often negative and stereotyped. An added feature of the time and of research was the imbalance of flow between the Soviet bloc and the “West”, with negativity and stereotyping also much in evidence. This whole complex was treated as an issue of inequality and became very

contentious, culminating in the UNESCO Media Declaration of 1978. The central problem was that the main proposals for ameliorating the situation would involve restrictions on western journalists and some forms of censorship.

Research and theory into international communication was driven largely by critical theory and the value of equality was central in this project. The term “cultural imperialism”, coined in the 1970s, was key to the critical ideas of the time, in which the subordination of voices of poorer countries was not just a problem of slow development but represented the suppression of dissent and delegitimisation of opposition to economic domination.

The main focus was on news and information, but there was also the larger question of the right of small countries and regions to maintain their language and culture, threatened by competition with cheap and popular (mainly American) products. In the international television market, there was not much place for content that did not follow the American popular entertainment model or matched its low prices, even when locally produced. In that way, essential economic conditions and historical subordination hindered any true equality of opportunity. This particular debate was taken up in Europe following the development of cable and satellite television. Conditions for resisting Americanisation (or *Dallasification*, as sometimes called) were more favourable. Within Europe itself there was a call for protection and support for minority and regional cultures and those of small nations with big neighbours in order to redress the balance. Problems of this nature had been accentuated by the arrival of satellite broadcasting in the late 1970s and then cable and satellite technologies, which threatened the sovereignty of states in respect of communication.

The differential representation of national and ethnic media content had been a very early concern of researchers, especially in the US. Research generally confirmed the suspicion that different groups were not treated equally or fairly. Such concerns were later widely taken up in research on the portrayal of ethnic groups in popular media content. The key norm deployed was one which upheld the right of such groups to suffer no discrimination, compared to a majority population. Normative theory in this area supported a dual expectation: no negativity or invisibility and also the opportunity for minorities to have their own means of self-expression where possible. The attainment of media equality in these terms can be seen as a very challenging goal; an impractical ideal. A similar version of the same theory and research was addressed to the questions of gender. Research had long confirmed that women had been found to be treated as inferiors to male protagonists or just as invisible (especially in news), although what would count as equality was problematic since the reality of most societies has involved discrimination against women. Behind much critical research in this area was a view that more positive and varied representation of women in the media would promote more real life equality.

Another question that occupied research and theory about media from an early point was that of media effects on the distribution of “knowledge”. It was clear that in all societies, knowledge of all kinds is unequally distributed as a result of varied levels

of education, social conditions and, possibly, the variable status of knowledge itself. It was also a positive expectation of mass media when they arrived, that they could raise the general level of knowledge and reduce the differences indicated. Apart from the general question of whether this was happening, there was an interest in assessing the relative success of different media, especially press and broadcasting, in this regard.

In the measurements applied, knowledge was generally defined as “serious” or “hard” information, in itself a form of bias that largely prejudged outcomes. The core phenomenon was defined as a systematic “knowledge gap” between the more and the less informed. Not surprisingly, audience attention to media information (e.g. the news) was indeed correlated with this gap, but there was little in the way of proof of direction of influence. The most that could be established was that press media were probably more informative than television, although this could have been reflecting the bias indicated in the definition of “knowledge” and that the benefits of newspapers were confined to the reading minority. Nevertheless, a preoccupation with inequalities of this kind persisted and re-appeared under the heading of the “digital divide”, referring to the very unequal distribution of access to online sources of information and other services. While basic access is now widespread, it is incomplete and of very varying quality. However, the notion of *equality* as a goal or standard has largely disappeared and the variations that exist seem beyond remedy.

Media news has been a perennial and fundamental object of research and theorising because of the close connection with public opinion and the central part that news has always played in the politics and everyday life of democratic societies. The concept of equality is central to thinking about news quality although the relationship is ambiguous. The key lies in the concept of truth as an absolute unique meaning attaching to information, even if the ideal is unachievable in practice. The truth is established on the basis of evidence collected in an objective/neutral manner, without preconceptions or special pleading. The obverse of truthful, accurate news, aside from misinformation or lies, is usually referred to as news bias, in which reports are slanted in one direction or another, whether on purpose or not. Reporting of news without bias calls for equal attention to all main participants in events and all relevant sources. The norm of equality, in this sense, does not require equal space or time to all events and objects, since it is modified by considerations of relevance and other factors. But the suspension of judgement and openness of mind required entails an assumption of equality. There is a close relationship between equality and objectivity, the foremost norm of journalism. Amongst other norms of journalism is the norm that it should not privilege the powerful, another manifestation of an outlook of equality.

Media equality as a normative concept

It is clear from this brief history of communication theory and research that the notion of equality has appeared under different forms and with varying degrees of centrality.

It is often used without any definition, treated as self-evident in meaning, merit and relevance. In general, greater equality is regarded as a valid measure of media content when questions of bias are at issue. The same applies to the matter of *access* to media, whether as source/sender or audience.

Several expressions of media equality can be distilled out of the corpus of work reviewed, as follows:

- equality of opportunity for individuals to make use of different media as source, although necessary conditions can include sufficient education and skill (e.g. literacy and “computer literacy”), money, certain kinds of “cultural capital”
- equal access to the means of communication, whether by way of large scale and organized methods or individual contact. The former relates primarily to the structures and control of mass communication
- equality of outcomes (e.g. learning effects) especially on some societal goals regarded as important, such as the capacity to act fully as citizens and participate in political decisions
- equality of representation in media of groups, minorities, nationalities, etc. This is usually understood as lack of discrimination, especially by negative stereotyping or invisibility. Equality also entails the capacity for minorities to directly control their own representation, either by having their own media outlets or having sufficient representation in the staff of the main mass media

This classification does not exhaust the complexities which make it hard to pin down this apparently simple concept. One explanation of this complexity lies in the variable relevance of equality to media activities, and its potential conflict with other values, especially freedom, cultural quality and diversity. On the first point, it is clear that the status of the value varies within quite a wide range: At one end it is treated as an absolute value to be attained as an end in itself at all costs and above other goals, a position that does not accord well with the primary purposes of public communication or with diversity.

By contrast, it can be seen as an optional feature or benefit. More likely, it has an intermediate status as a means to one particular end or as entailed by the pursuit of some more specific and overriding purpose, such as the functioning of democracy, the decrease of social inequality or the removal of discrimination in society. Often the concept of equality becomes the focus of attention when a particular issue of *inequality* is being addressed. This can arise in relation to the reach of mass media within a population, the quality of media service offered, or the availability of service to different groups, for instance different regions and localities. In the matter of ownership and control, there has always been great inequality in the real access for different sectors of society, in seeming contradiction of the promise of “press freedom”, sometimes justified by the priority attached to rights of private property.

In respect of the many and endemic inequalities in all aspects of media control, content and reception, a claim is rarely made for absolute equality. This is so, not only

for reasons of impracticality, but because the inequalities referred to often reflect the basic diversity of human societies and of media preferences and needs. What seems to be called for is some idea of “relative equality”, usually expressed in terms of “equality of opportunity” plus avoidance of clear discrimination that might have harmful consequences for powerless minorities, in particular. What is often missing, however, is any agreed standard by which an apparent inequality is unacceptable or even avoidable.

In respect of equality there is also a tension between a *positive* interpretation of the norm, which would involve active intervention to promote media equality in any of the ways mentioned and a *negative* version in which any intervention in the working of media is only justified where there is evidence of harmful inequality (such as racist representations or significant exclusion from media provision).

The relation of equality to the norm of diversity is also complex. On the one hand, equality can be seen as the maximisation of diversity where all have the same rights of access and treatment. On the other hand, diversity can be seen as requiring media access and content and reception to approximately mirror the actual diversity of society in respect of locality, ethnicity, preferences, etc. The powerful influence exerted by economic inequality, by way of the free market, is usually left out of this account.

The public interest in media equality

Although there are clearly going to be beneficiaries from the reduction of inequality in any of the ways mentioned, much of this might be accounted for in terms of increased access and choice for individual media “consumers”. The question of the larger public benefit is less easy to establish, since we are speaking mainly of social goods that are not easy to specify, but hypothesised in social and political theory. The case for there being a public interest is, nevertheless, a strong one, even if there are rather differing views of what this entails. From one point of view, a strong centralised state finds it more convenient for the exercise of its power to have a media system under its effective control that reaches the whole population effectively and more or less uniformly. This is not the situation in most modern democracies, but all media systems tend to defer to power and be available to support legitimate needs of authorities. There are varied reasons for this, including the dynamics of “news” which puts independent journalism at a disadvantage and encourages reliance on official sources. This “benefit” to society is not one that has motivated attempts at media reform but it has played a background role in some equalizing measures, including those relating to public broadcasting and provisions for universal access to broadcasting and telecommunications.

The theme of national unification or integration (both historically seen as public benefits, even necessities) also informs the aspiration for a shared national culture or sphere of linguistic and cultural influence. The media have been seen as key elements in the preservation (or destruction) of national cultures, promoting a widespread, therefore more equal, reach for national and regional media.

These foundations for seeking equality are essentially conservative, even reactionary, but there are democratic and progressive arguments too, based primarily on the requirements for full and effective citizenship. Citizens need to be widely and sufficiently informed on public issues of contemporary relevance and be able to follow and take part in society wide debates or conversations. The only way this is likely to occur is by way of mass media with reliable journalism and platforms for alternative views to be expressed. This is by now a mainstream and conventional view, despite efforts to counter it by attacks on journalists and pollution of the news by various methods and forms of propaganda.

Successive changes in communication technology have usually been followed by some public efforts to promote its development or to extend benefits to a larger share of the population. In the case of print publication this was expressed mainly in the removal of barriers set by public authorities themselves (censorship, licensing, tax, etc.). In the case of wireless telegraphy and telephony, efforts were more pro-active and motives mixed. The expected were first and foremost for the state (defence and administrative and economic efficiency). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, international competition in military and economic matters impelled development of new communications. The coming of broadcasting invited much more intrusive regulation which often had an equalising purpose and effect by controlling access and competition and ensuring wide coverage. Public broadcasting systems in Europe exemplified this most clearly, since they involved one way or another of allocating rights to transmission in ways acceptable to public authorities but also responsive to different public purposes, audience demands and arguably fair to most parties.

The most recent set of innovations, driven by computers and telecommunications have produced “new media” that is gradually taking over pre-existing ones. In the early stages there was public support and intervention for much of the same mixture of motives indicated. Perhaps the most significant, however, has been the economic industrial benefits, as the media acquire increasing significance in their own right as a branch of the economy. Equality does not play much part in industrial policy except where it relates to widening participation in the consumer market. Although the main economic benefits of globalization accrue to only a few countries there are a number of markets defined by geography, language, culture and economic level and all nations have an interest either in protecting or extending their own sphere of influence where possible.

Policies for increasing media equality in the public interest

It is worth recalling at this point, the extent to which media equality in whatever manifestation is nearly everywhere a secondary consideration. When equality is the central focus of attention, there is a temptation to forget the many endemic limitations

to the attainment of equality, however defined. Most basic is the fundamental social and economic inequality of societies, despite important variations and exceptions. This is caused by historic class and cultural differences that have not been abolished by advances in education and material welfare. The media comprise cultural and material goods in themselves and their distribution reflects the underlying divisions and inequalities of each society. These constraints cannot be overcome, or even reduced, in any short time span. It is also the case that media are continuously moving on and policies appropriate to one medium at one time can eventually become obsolete or even counter-productive. Nevertheless, the range and significance of public benefits, as just summarised, means that some interventions on behalf of equality are better than none.

The variety of forms of media (in)equality that exist is matched by a variety of instruments of policy. The main goals addressed have been:

- more equal access to the means of production and transmission;
- universal service and net neutrality;
- more equal representation in content;
- more equal distribution of reliable and relevant information amongst the public;
- more equal rights to autonomy in media matters for groups defined by culture, language or region, in resistance to hegemonic media influences;
- more equal access as audiences to diverse sources and forms of provision;
- more equal ability to have the communication equipment needed to enjoy the benefits now available to many but not all.

These goals are all complex, difficult to achieve and often slippery to pin down or define. Their pursuit also involves a struggle with political and economic realities that blunt the will to action and frustrate the attempts, never mind the obstinacy with which public policy often fails to match up to the aspirations of policy makers. It is important, but rarely possible, to find means that do not come against principled opposition on grounds of established rights, such as those of free expression and property rights.

The first goal, access to the means of production and distribution, is open to various kinds of policy intervention. A basic measure is anti-monopoly legislation which treats media as a special case and aims to limit monopoly trends (of its nature is non egalitarian). A more controversial means is to achieve equal access by way of subsidy in some form to alternative, minority, or failing media, although there is always a problem in the selection of beneficiaries on political or economic grounds. The outcome may not be more equality.

In the case of broadcasting (radio and television), the goal *can* be aided by licensing requirements that favour otherwise excluded groups, and also work against monopoly. Public broadcasting structures are the most likely to be successful in equalising access, by concentrating control over access in one body that typically has obligations to reflect

the communication needs of the whole public and is answerable for what it does. However, Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) was largely instituted in European countries for mixed reasons and under circumstances that no longer apply. An essential feature was that of public monopoly ownership and control, which is no longer acceptable.

Moreover, public service broadcasting applies to a means of communication in relative decline. However much it has been a key element in the advance and protection of the public interest in many countries, it is hard to see how PBS, under conditions of globalisation, can provide a model for the current spectrum of media. It offers many lessons for other kinds of independent public regulation of media. Public broadcasting structures have greatly varying competence, but, in the best case, they can and do enforce political neutrality and reduce partisan bias in public communication, as well as involve overall democratic control. These goals are very much influenced by ideas of social equality.

The second goal – equal representation in content- is very difficult to achieve by policy, except in the case of public broadcasting. This is not a small exception, but its effectiveness is decreasing. Apart from this, the only policy measures available involve restrictions on forms of discrimination that are illegal or clearly harmful for the public as a whole. Most success here depends on the normative inclination of the media themselves and their professional commitment to truth and fairness. Some influence can be exerted by press councils and similar bodies, but sanctions are likely to be weak.

Research has tended consistently to show that information levels vary according to education, social class and media use, with quite big differences between national societies. Public broadcasting seems to have been more successful than commercial systems at reducing such “knowledge gaps”, in line with one of its main objectives. However, cultural factors also play a large part and are largely beyond any positive manipulation. There are also many pressures that can be brought to bear on media to “raise their informative game”, including those from press councils, industry self-government and sometimes independent media regulators.

The goal of protecting the interests of minority media or minorities within a national media system can be tackled by several of the measures already mentioned, perhaps especially by subsidy to support national and regional culture and language.

The protection of a national media system, or parts of it, from overwhelming competition by a large neighbour or an “invasion” of foreign media content is more difficult, since this has usually been driven by overwhelming economic motives and the demands of media consumers. There has been a general tendency to cede control of communication borders and weaken media sovereignty. There has however also been resurgence by way of own national production aided by the intrinsic popularity of content that is culturally closer to home. In this area, protectionism is difficult in the context of international trade agreements.

The goal of expansion of audience reach for media of all kinds is probably the goal facing the least obstacles, since the forces of industry and market work towards it all the time, alongside public demand. At certain points, historically been policy support for

instance in the form of tax concessions to print media and favourable postal charges. The electronic media have benefitted a great deal from a broad policy of universal access applying to postal services, broadcasting and wireless.

Governments accept a responsibility for investing in infrastructure. The new electronic media in the 1980s received wide support and subsidy from the state, hopeful for long term economic and strategic benefit. However, this role was largely abandoned as impossible or unnecessary. Instead, it has been left to the overwhelming and seemingly successful efforts of the global electronic firms to drive the penetration of mobile and other consumer media. Despite this, it cannot be claimed that the “digital divide” has disappeared. It has however been replaced by a graded structure of possession of the latest technology and online content, governed by income differences.

In conclusion

This chapter has emphasised the complex and elusive nature of the concept of equality. It is particularly hard to pin down in relation to online media, beyond the (theoretical) fact of unlimited access for all and the policy of “net neutrality” that promises no discrimination as between “providers” in matters of control and regulation. The underlying trends of media today are profoundly unsettling and require re-examination of our normative goals and assumptions.

The promise of open access has been largely fulfilled, but without the hoped for benefits, for several reasons. On the one hand, the media use habits of the majority in industrial societies were already firmly established. The predominant media culture and typical life style does not favour taking advantage of new opportunities to communicate in the public sphere. There are many voices but not large audiences. On the other hand, the pressure to advance technology and to monetise innovations has distorted the potential that exists, turning every open communication space into a commercial opportunity for advertisers, or actively privatising personal communication.

What remains necessary yet steadily more elusive is the more equal distribution of public communication that has qualities of transparency, non-exploitation and reliability as well as diversity and relevance. Such a goal does not look attainable, except by structural provision, guaranteed by democratic control, itself equally unlikely. In the end we are back with the two narratives mentioned at the start; one the technological and the other a matter of human agency. Technology seems to be running ahead of purpose, strongly driven by global market forces.

Reference

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