

# The Discourse of Convergence

## *A Neo-liberal Trojan Horse*

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In the age of the Internet and digital, it's certainly striking how durable our oldest types of television have turned out to be [...] public service broadcasting is a battle standard we no longer need to relay to – a redundant piece of voodoo.

- Michael Jackson,  
Former Chief Executive of Channel 4 in the UK

Convergence is a 'slippery term' deployed as a political adjunct of neo-liberal economic policy, argues the former Member of European Parliament [MEP] and critic of convergence policy, Carole Tongue (2001)<sup>1</sup>. Our assessment clarifies this deployment by the current Labour government in the United Kingdom. New Labour discourse divorces 'convergence' from its technical context and instead links it with neo-liberal ideology to justify media deregulation, ownership concentration and private participation in the sector. In our view this discourse of convergence paradoxically de-politicises the debate in an orchestrated attempt to legitimate these and related changes in media legislation. In opposition to these efforts, we argue that 'convergence' must instead be analysed as a social phenomenon with diverse implications that certainly warrant policy debate.

Our argument locates important elements of what we call the *discourse of convergence* in New Labour's designs for media policy. Firstly, we suggest the discourse will limit the participation and commitment of the State in regulating broadcasting and telecommunications. Secondly, we explore how the discourse seeks to open the media still further to market forces and the promotion of 'free market' values.

Although we recognise the powerful impact technological convergence is having on the media landscape, in this light we question the validity of such as the driving force. We therefore take a contrary view in arguing that new regulation is needed to preserve commitments to Public Service Broadcasting [PSB] within the emerging frame created by technological convergence. We further argue that the public needs to be aware of the political and economic

motivations underpinning New Labour discourse about convergence. This discourse of convergence is increasingly evident elsewhere in Europe and that underscores the importance of critical assessment of key constituent elements. This chapter seeks to help demystify the lines of argumentation.

## New labour and the discourse of convergence

From the outset, the Blair government under the aegis of 'New Labour'<sup>2</sup> sought to link the concepts of 'convergence' and 'market' in a seamless discourse that treats economic regulation and content regulation as essentially indistinguishable. When asked by a select committee in 1998 if convergence was more a technical term than a market phenomenon, Barbara Roche, British Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry at the time, replied:

We [as a government] must have a coherent response. We shall seek to develop the principles of coherency in economic regulation and of consistency in content regulation.<sup>3</sup>

By situating 'convergence' in this context, New Labour<sup>4</sup> signals their intentions to rationalise a media policy discourse wherein stimulating market competition appears to be inevitable. It's presumably necessary because there is no choice. When confronted with the post-electoral demands of two of its most important publics – the old left and media owners – New Labour's discourse undermines commitments to PSB in crafting this sophism of reconciliation.

In the European tradition, media regulation has sought to limit media concentration to partially guarantee content diversity and political pluralism<sup>5</sup>. In its *Report on Media Diversity in Europe* (2002), the Council of Europe reiterated the notion when suggesting that a strong PSB system "is necessary to maintain diversity in the European media market". But the discourse of convergence argues that regulation obstructs effective commercial decision-making, posited as a prerequisite for securing competitiveness in an overwhelming global market<sup>6</sup>. New Labour has sought to bridge such contradictions by suggesting that such competitiveness actually means pluralism, tenuously linked with a deepening of democracy, via widening consumer choice<sup>7</sup>.

The discourse of convergence is an ideological construction articulated by politicians and corporations to justify and promote their policy agenda in the public domain. It is the same discourse with the same arguments, symbols and constructions that paved the way for similar legislative changes in the mid-1990s in the United States<sup>8</sup>. New Labour's approach to communication deregulation coincided with its efforts to modernise as a political force which began as early as 1994<sup>9</sup> (Kampfner, 2001). The trumpeted 'radical edge'

to achieve that modernisation was underpinned by the language of technological determinism that was pervasive in Labour's national conference in 1995 where Tony Blair spoke about 'waking up' to the challenge of the information superhighway.

This discourse of convergence responds to a specific dynamic comprised of actors and interests that represent a struggle to co-opt debate in the scientific community. This is no coincidence. Looking at key speeches, papers and other documents about the media issued by New Labour since 1995<sup>10</sup>, their discourse of convergence is intended to 'manage' this debate. Capturing the theme of convergence in a political context creates an illusion of reconciliation between society's interests and the party's pre-electoral compromises to media corporations. Effectively, then, the discourse of convergence is a non-democratic rhetorical device designed to obscure a close pre-electoral relationship between New Labour and powerful media conglomerates. Those pre-electoral agreements have been documented (Semetko, 2000; Herman & McChesney, 1999; Jones, 1999).

The 1998 Green Paper<sup>11</sup> titled *Regulating Communications: Approaching Convergence in the Information Age*, captured the Government's "preliminary views and reasoning on the likely implications of digital convergence for the legal and regulatory frameworks covering broadcasting and telecommunications", as framed by New Labour. Significantly, this document was issued through the Department of Trade and Industry [DTI] rather than through the traditional route of the Department of Media, Culture and Sport [DMSC]<sup>12</sup>. Selling the discourse would presumably be more efficient if articulated by a department that has an obvious goal of paving the way for private investment in the telecommunications sector – rather than by an office focused on cultural and communications issues.

Although New Labour has lent rhetorical support to PSB, its policy emphasis stresses the need for private sector participation in order to strengthen the market by encouraging firms to merge and dominate sectors in the digital age. This policy direction echoes a goal of the former Conservative government, expressed by the 1986 Peacock Committee, to create a 'sophisticated market system based on consumer sovereignty' rather than public service goals (Home Office, 1986, p. 133). The Communications White Paper 2000<sup>13</sup>, the most important document regarding media policy in the UK issued recently, prioritises industrial policy and deregulation over citizen welfare and social cohesion. Its main objective is to "make the UK home to the most dynamic and competitive communications and media market in the world", a clear break with previous policies in which the main objective was to "guarantee public services access and diversity".

To reconcile the 'radical edge' of technological convergence with the traditional core of past years, New Labour elites embraced the so-called 'Third Way'<sup>14</sup> as an ideological platform that justified (in the context of inevitable globalisation) changes in British media legislation. This construction frames Information Communication Technologies [ICT] as a driving force of the 21<sup>st</sup>

Century, posits new media as a defining element for an information society and the 'communications revolution', and suggests that the spread of information technology is 'deeply bound up with the process of globalisation'<sup>15</sup>.

After winning the 1997 UK elections and gaining powerful media support along the way, the Labour party – now controlled by the New Labour movement – positioned this 'communications revolution' as the heart of its vision for modern Britain. Consequently, this vision became an integral part of party ideology. This approach features an uncertain balancing act between an increasing role for private investment in the design and development of digital communications and the retention of public policy objectives that promise to widen access to close the 'digital divide'.

For the power-holders now articulating the Labour Party platform, convergence is axiomatic of universal and inevitable 'effects'. Intellectually, this worldview is presented as a technologically driven and historically linear series of *progressive* achievements. The resultant discourse has an apolitical flavour that is evident in its claims that technology is an autonomous force outside the parameters of societal influence<sup>16</sup>. This thesis of technological determinism enables the New Labour movement to side step reasoned political debate.

At least in part, the discourse of convergence is an attempt by New Labour to mobilise new media technologies to channel policy designs. This is nothing new or any invention of New Labour. Ironically, the so-called New Right in the 1980s, inspired by neo-liberalism and the monetarist policies of the Thatcher period<sup>17</sup>, took the same approach in harnessing emerging cable and satellite technologies to achieve similar ends. The New Right mobilised cable and satellite technologies to argue for 'more efficiency'<sup>18</sup> through deregulation and in order to open television (which they considered to be dominated by the Left) to new commercial actors (Walters, 1989: 380-398)<sup>19</sup>.

But in such political discourse, New Labour has gone one better in successfully construing new media technology as an autonomous and inevitable dynamic that requires a new approach to regulation. The achievement provides New Labour an opportune discontinuity in the more properly social dynamics that define media history. The notion that technology development determines regulatory change is premised on an optimistic treatment of history. That history mobilises technological objects to represent an upbeat view of the future that too conveniently ignores social and cultural determinants, of late described by Murdock as a culture of marketization (Murdock, Wieten and Dahlgren, 2000: 35-58). Not only does technological determinism facilitate freeing media corporations from the social history of policy to support and justify commercial designs, it also smoothes New Labour's retreat from a defence of the public interest.

The discourse of convergence is fully supported by powerful media corporations. 'Being digital', said Rupert Murdoch, 'brings the endless possibilities of the future into a sharper focus' (cited in Negrepointe, 1995)<sup>20</sup>. Media corporations echo the pivotal importance of this discourse as an essential

element in their strategies to undermine regulation; it allows them to proclaim the pseudo-truism that media regulation is useless in a digital era – while quietly spending millions on lobbying to either influence or prevent legislation.

The discourse of convergence has been positioned at the core of a more comprehensive neo-liberal discourse that seeks to justify market-oriented capitalism as the framework of democracy. Its use by New Labour to argue for a new legal framework for British media reflects a technological determinism to justify a market-driven media system as an inevitable and global scenario where merging and converging is indistinguishable and PSB is presumably non-viable.

### Why fix it if it ain't broken?

All of this strikes us as quite ironic when the United Kingdom has perhaps the most successful PSB model in the world. Policies governing public broadcasting in the UK became a role model for many countries and stand in sharp contrast with the commercial model developed in the United States<sup>21</sup>. With the emergence of the BBC, the concept of PSB became a clearly viable project even though the concept itself has always had detractors from both sides of the ideological spectrum<sup>22</sup>. Paradoxically, then, current changes in British media legislation are framed as though addressing a failed institution. Most changes have been justified by the so-called explosion of 'consumer choice' brought about by converging digital media formats and tenuously linked with the supposed inability of the PSB model to cope with the technological challenges.

New Labour favours 'light touch' regulation (Communications White Paper, 2000) and a *laissez faire, laissez passer* approach. The approach suggests that self-regulation and unrestrained market competition is the only way to secure the fullest democratic potential of new media. The discourse further suggests that media convergence will create new and better relationships between audiences and broadcasters. Digital media are therefore described as 'democratic media', and must inevitably replace traditional media structures and institutions to consequently enable forms of 'direct democracy'. As the argument goes, this will provide the public with 'control' and 'power' over the media through more interactivity, less mass media, and more individualistic relations.

In theory at least, technological convergence could increase market competition. But that does not automatically obviate the desirability of preserving PSB as an underpinning element of any comprehensive system. Neither does it inherently justify deregulation; such is factually imperative to harmonise technological standards and avoid fragmented media platforms. In point of fact, convergence requires regulation for practical and even commercial reasons, as well as to ensure that digital resource is managed fairly in the

public interest. There is scant evidence that market forces alone could guarantee such. Quite the reverse, actually.

Past and present experiences in many countries in recent years indicate that deregulation in the media sector is mainly of benefit for exploiting lucrative revenue streams, but with questionable benefit to the communities that constitute its markets<sup>23</sup>. Nor is there evidence to support the view that technological convergence has much altered patterns of use for traditional media, or that it provides 'power' and 'control' for the public. Moreover, market trends associated with consolidation should have already demystified the notion that 'convergence' has any robust potential to foster pluralism and diversity. In reality convergence signals voracious demands for intensive capital investment that have to date resulted in lower than anticipated profit margins – all of which makes actually reduces competition and only creates concentration<sup>24</sup>.

Confronted with this scenario, there is an argument to be made that only PSB has, in practice, been able to guarantee sufficient diversity in the mainstream media, which in turn suggests the need for a stronger regulatory role to absolutely guarantee the promise of free and universal access. Retreating from the facts is no service to the public, which is both market and electorate.

That hasn't happened yet, and sadly to date there is little indication that it might happen. On the contrary, in the discourse of convergence as it relates to digital television and radio services, PSB is defined less as a broadcaster and more as a content provider subject to the self-regulated interests of satellite and cable operators<sup>25</sup>. When the BBC recently asked the satellite operator BSkyB for preferential fees for non-commercial PSB content, BSkyB chief executive Tony Ball ridiculed even the idea. Paraphrasing recent legislation and in accordance with convergence discourse, Ball said: <sup>26</sup>

This country [UK] has got the best growth and the strongest position in digital television anywhere in Europe. Why do we have that? Did we all wake up one morning and find it was there? Did the tooth fairy leave it under a pillow? No. (...) We [the private sector] make this investment in the platform and they expect us to give it to them for free. It's absurd. The public service broadcasters can't get their heads around that, they want some special dispensation.

Why these private satellite carriers that operate under British licence and enjoy quasi-monopolistic conditions were charging fees in the first place to PSB never entered the equation<sup>27</sup>. But in response the BBC began developing and implementing a strategy to create free-to-air digital services in joint ventures with private corporations<sup>28</sup>. Even if this approach achieves relative success the experience is sadly condemned to failure in the mainstream if private satellite and cable carriers are not required by law to carry the services<sup>29</sup>.

The discourse of convergence has enabled media corporations and New Labour to push ahead with legislation in which there is very little PSB commitment from cable or satellite. As a continuation of the old legislative agenda

launched by the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, new legislation has allowed a consolidation of the digital infrastructure into the concentrated hands of multinational corporations.

Within this situation, digital transmission of PSB content is becoming increasingly more reliant on commercial distributors<sup>30</sup>, and as it becomes more a content provider rather than a broadcaster an important portion of its service community (i.e. public) is alienated. Indeed, contrary to rosy expectations proscribed by the discourse of convergence, there hasn't been any explosion in audiences. Instead, we find compelling evidence of a continuous erosion and fragmentation of audiences<sup>31</sup>.

Thus and contrary to what the discourse of convergence suggests, public service broadcasting is a key constituent of the modern public sphere and, irrespective of the rhetoric, digital technology has not altered the nature of broadcasting as a public space. Even if transmitted via satellite, cable or the Internet, PSB is still intrinsically situated in the public domain and therefore subject to the State's regulatory and policy authority. It is true that technological convergence makes government control of media dynamics difficult and that contemporary trends require a pragmatic and globally-aware revision of current legislation, but regulation remains the only mechanism by which a people can guarantee universal and balanced access to media services. Legislation should be broadened to incorporate the new players brought about by technological convergence. But those who broadcast dozens of digital channels are not inherently less accountable than those who used to broadcast a single analogue channel.

### The remit and convergence

There is an underlying historical mechanism that encourages a long-term convergence across cultural boundaries, first and most powerfully in economics, then in the realm of politics and finally (and most distantly) in culture. What drives this process forward in the first instance is modern science and technology, whose ability to create material wealth and weapons of war is so great that virtually all societies come to terms with it. (Fukuyama 2001)

Fukuyama's insight highlights why convergence has become a key concept in the ideological discourse of neo-liberalism and how this transcends the media debate. In the realm of such discourse, convergence is construed as an end in itself; it is a tool for justifying a liberal-democratic model. Neo-liberal discourse relies on convergence to justify deregulation and to promote private 'participation' in the media sector while also weakening State commitment to PSB. The discourse of convergence works to de-politicise media debate and obscures a complex media environment actually comprised of many distinct bodies with different stakes, traditions and cultures.

The tangible policy manifestations of the discourse of convergence vigorously pursue deregulation and thereby by the relaxation of State commitments to public service media. It can only achieve this by divorcing the term from any socially determined context. In our view this is wrong-headed. Recent experiences in the UK illustrate that new regulation is the only means to truly guarantee widening participation and to actually ensure media diversity. The logic of the discourse of convergence obviously runs contrary to the logic of regulation<sup>32</sup>. But in doing so it ignores the fact that human interaction with technological objects, through cultural, economic, political and social intervention, defines the nature and necessity of media. Digital technology is a different platform for mediation services, but the principles inscribing how and why they are services for the public aren't inherently any different.

## Notes

1. Interview with the former MEP Carole Tongue in London in February 2001.
2. After several electoral defeats the British Labour party has reinvented itself using as an ideological platform the so-called 'Third Way'. Re-branded 'New Labour' it intends to appeal to the middle ground electorate through a centrist-market view of Social Democracy.
3. Mrs. Barbara Roche, Minister for Small Firms, Trade and Industry in the European Standing Committee B, chaired by Mr. Peter Atkinson on Wednesday 8 April 1998 on Convergence of the Telecommunications, Media and Information Technology
4. Now in government after almost two decades of Conservative rule.
5. See also Michalis (2001).
6. The recent UK Communications Bill (2002) promises deregulation to promote competitiveness and investment and self-regulation wherever appropriate, backed up by tough measures to protect plurality and diversity. Nevertheless, we argue that deregulation and diversity are contradictory statements.
7. As stated in the Communications White Paper 2000 approved with some modification by the British Parliament.
8. This discourse had already entered the political rhetoric in the US with former Vice President Al Gore's keynote 'information superhighway' speech in 1994. Gore promised a 'new Athenian age of democracy' made possible by the 'global information highway'. Gore imagined 'a kind of conversation in which everyone who wants can have his or her say' (Robins & Webster, 1999: p.229).
9. As Kampfner (2001) writes: "Blair and his advisers spent the 1990s looking for a new ideology. It was not enough simply to portray the Third Way as the middle ground between the free market and socialism. A radical edge was deemed essential and modernisation was seized on as the underpinning theme".
10. A wide number of official documents were analysed by the authors, but for reasons of space could not be referenced in detail in this paper. Most of these documents are available at The Stationery Office at <http://www.tso.co.uk>.
11. Green Papers are first proposals of governments for new legislation in the UK.
12. Further blurring the distinctions between the market, the technology and the broadcast medium with its emphasis on the 'transactional capability of digital technology...' and its potential to '...carry out a number of familiar activities, such as banking, buying and selling in association with traditional products such as broadcast television' (DTI, 1998). Indeed, the Green Paper proposed a new media model, which stresses the importance of the role of the Internet in modern media and how the processes of technological

- convergence erodes 'the traditional distinctions between telecommunications and broadcasting' (DTI, 1998).
13. A derivation of the former Green Paper and now the foundation of the approved Communications Bill.
  14. See Giddens, A (1994). *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics*. Polity London.
  15. *Giddens, A 1998, The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy. Cambridge Polity Press p.31.*
  16. These discursive elements were observed also by Goodwin & Spittle (2002 pp.225-249).
  17. In 1986 The Peacock Report, commissioned by Thatcher's Conservative government to locate alternative funding for the BBC, but rejecting advertising, and the 1990 Broadcasting Act led to radical changes for television in the UK.
  18. The media moguls Eddie Shar and Rupert Murdoch took full advantage of a severely weakened union (a result of the Thatcher governments new legislation on industrial relations) to install new technological processes resulting in one of the most violent industrial exercises of the Thatcher years.
  19. Before Thatcher the Labour party in the late 70s started to look in the same direction. As James Curran (cited in Collins and Murrone, 1996 pp. 1-17) points out, the Annan Report of 1977 began a process of abandoning the assumption of the public good in broadcasting by looking to competition in the market place.
  20. Rupert Murdoch's comments on the 1995 hardback edition of *Being Digital* by Nicholas Negreponete. Published by Hodder and Stoughton.
  21. A historical analysis of the broadcast medium suggests that a similar criterion was argued for in the past. For many politicians and legislators of the first half of the 20th Century, regulation and control of radio waves appeared to be ineffectual. American legislators adopted this approach and saw many parallels between broadcasting and other industries, hence the *laissez faire*, *laissez passer* response towards the emergent phenomenon. The response in the UK was very different. From the beginning, several British legislators and political leaders saw broadcasting as a public service and the debate was influenced by the fact that technological developments are socially shaped and therefore it is possible to legislate and design politics to regulate them; needless to say that this position contrasts sharply with the current approach.
  22. The main criticism centres on the dilemma of 'who regulates the regulators' and that PSB can be used as a propaganda tool by governments. This is similar to the view of those on the Right who view public service broadcasting as institutionalised, paternalistic, elitist and managed by 'snobs' (an expression used by Rupert Murdoch to describe critics of the tabloid press).
  23. The US and Australia being the most notorious examples.
  24. This is clear from an analysis of the value and composition of technological stock market at NASDAQ in the past three years.
  25. Certainly, the satellite and cable spectrums are not publicly regulated and are dominated entirely by private and market-oriented rules.
  26. *The Guardian*, November 4, 2002.
  27. When other private content provider, ITV, lodged an official complaint against the •26m fee BSkyB charges the channel to appear on its pay TV network the case was rejected. The key here is that in this case the broadcasters no longer deal with government bodies, but with agencies more preoccupied with expanding the telecommunications infrastructure. Namely Ofitel –the telecommunication body- in accordance with the new legislation.
  28. Including BSkyB.
  29. Paradoxically in many countries in which the cable and satellite system is based on the US-model, there is the obligation by operators to carry community channels for free.
  30. News International, in order to consolidate its position with its Star network in China, dropped the BBC signal in order to please communist authorities. This could have pro-

- found implications in the long term, since now the carriers are the ones dictating the content rules.
31. Worse still is the concern that the British government will not meet its target of 95% of homes with digital television by 2010. This is perhaps one of the most evident weakness of the current legislation proposal by the current British government and in a type of Kafkaian twist it been suggested that the government might be willing to give away free digital television sets to its poorest citizens.
  32. Interview with Julian Petley from Brunel University.

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