

# What principles should guide regulation in the Internet age?

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*Only 3% of internet users have internet speeds slower than 2 mpbs and are without access to good broadband connections, which means that the internet has become not only increasingly pervasive but also far more accessible than it was before. For David Mahoney, director of Policy Development at Ofcom, this means we have to think how we regulate this digital world.*

*Polis Intern Anuradha Santhanam reports on his Polis Media Agenda Talk at LSE.*

Many forms of technology have quickly become omnipresent; 94% users now own mobile phones, a significant number of which are internet-enabled smartphones that provide users instant, on-the-go access to the World Wide Web.

New generations, Mahoney says, are proactive, creating stories and messages themselves. We are increasingly in an age of citizen journalists, with content now largely publicly created and curated.

However, he says, 'there is a long way to go in making ubiquity a reality.'

Mahoney described the modern-day living room as rather similar to the living rooms of the 1950s, with every member' left to their own devices'. Much the same could be said even today, except for the fact that the 'devices' are now literally, electronic devices. With each member involved with a smartphone, computer or console, different lines of communication open up through each of them.

## Predicting Policy

He says it is difficult, due to sheer volumes, to predict consumer behaviour – and when one cannot predict the future, how does one go about predicting media policy?

With businesses previously in the physical sphere now migrating en masse to the world of the internet, there is an increased need for some form of regulation or protocol, he argues. Certainly, media plurality needs to be promoted in the physical sphere. With the internet, however, the public has become more involved than ever before, and there are multiple forms of information, communication and content, and a very diverse range of players from different industries, each with their own interests.

"Regulating in an IP environment," he says, "is much harder than regulating in an analog environment".

## Economic Goals

The needs of the industry need to be cross-examined with the needs of the public to shape policy. While public interest is of the foremost importance, the industry also needs to achieve its economic goals.

Mahoney said the audience needs to be protected from 'dangerous' content, or harmful content such as inflammatory hate and speech child pornography.

Media plurality is extremely important as well – the very structure of the internet makes it more 'democratic' than other media, but those with enough power can sway this balance, and improved regulatory policy can help prevent this, or at the very least, mitigate it, keeping the internet neutral and an even playing field for all its participants.

## Democratic Needs

This plurality is a fundamental part of democratic society, but it is difficult to quantify it. There should be policies in

place, however, to prevent larger agencies or media from blocking smaller ones.

Regulation is increasingly difficult in the age of technological convergence, but third-party, non-government regulation is important to circumvent this.

I agree with Mahoney when he says that they must 'keep revising guiding principles', as the internet is an incredibly dynamic entity, and policy will need constant, regular review to keep up with these changes if both public and industry interests are to be protected.

*This article by Polis Intern Anuradha Santhanam @anumccartney*

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