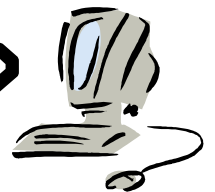


At the 8th annual conference of the Asian Media Information and Communication (AMIC) Centre, new information and communication technology was the centrepiece of the discussion and debates. One of the liveliest sessions dealt with media regulation and whether such is possible—or desirable—in a world of converged technologies. Lilian S. Mercado Carreon, who attended the AMIC conference to speak on women’s power in media, filed the following report.

Can Converging Media Be Controlled?



by Lilian S. Mercado Carreon



Debates have accompanied the emergence and eventual dominance of new technologies in the way that we communicate in both public and private life. There are debates over the homogenising effect of the technologies on culture. There are debates over whether they will enhance or limit democracy. There are debates over whether they abet and make trafficking of women a lot more easier to commit and harder to apprehend. There are also debates about how the new technologies, combined with the merging of media giants, actually allow a few

powerful people to dictate with greater force not just media’s agenda but the public and policy agenda as well. These concerns are the platforms from which proposals for regulation have emanated, and this too has been the subject of debate.

A decade ago, journalists working in the field thought that the facsimile machine was already a big technological leap that allowed them to send stories faster. Back then, few suspected that the development of information and communication technologies would hurtle forward even faster; so fast that people find it extremely difficult to keep

pace especially after different media technologies started to converge.

Among the front-runners in the converged media are Time Warner, CNBC, MSNBC and COX. All are giant transnational corporations, made even bigger by the shift in technology that put them in a position to “gather information or develop programmes for one medium and then use it for other media.” In the meantime, newspapers that perceive being online as simply an extension of being printed have lost audiences who want more from online media.

These media giants were also among the first to argue

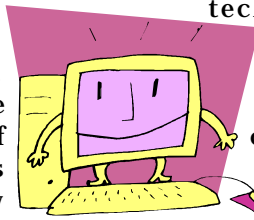
against regulation. Indeed, Australian media mogul Rupert Murdoch declares that “technology (has) carried us beyond politicians and regulators.” Referring to the development of print media, it is argued that had there been regulation of print, there would never have been the diversity of magazines, newspapers and books that is now enjoyed in many countries. Basically, the point being made is that there should be no regulation when media convergence is offering such diverse functions and services, and so the potential for change.

True, the opportunities offered by converging technologies create a sense that we are on the threshold of a major change. However, it is shown by the experience in Asia and even in the West such as in the United Kingdom that unlike the few media giants, many other mass-media owners, the communication industry and people themselves do not shift that fast to new media technologies. Many believe that new technologies would, for some more time to come, complement rather than replace established forms of communication.

That media convergence is happening gradually may be more of a blessing than a curse. This allows us time to debate and decide what we want from it. It allows us to decide how to harness the converged media for the public good and not just for the benefit of a few individuals.

Yet as we debate, it is crucial to be mindful of the environment

in which the debate is being conducted. Even now, there is already concern that the next big source of conflict may be between the information-rich and the information-poor, with



technology defining who is rich and who is poor. On one side of the conflict are those whose “brains are enough to put them in extraordinary positions of power and influence” and those for whom power comes from having huge capitals to invest in technology. On the other, there are those who may have talent but have little or no hard

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cash. If, several decades ago, the problem had to do with the lack of spectrum from which to broadcast, today scarcity is no longer about spectrum but about financial resources, power, and representation in the decisions being made about media content. New information and communication technology has created a paradox where media audiences fragment according to a variety of media and program preferences, while media ownership

consolidates into fewer hands.

How do we ensure that this concentration of ownership is beneficial to citizens? There are no signs that private monopolies are inclined to fulfil certain basic democratic principles. While competition in the manufacture of goods and services may be sufficient to ensure quality standards and the best interest of consumers, the public-interest aspect of communication and broadcasting makes this field different.

It is also true that the “possibilities offered by a true convergence of telecommunications, publishing, computing and broadcasting” are many. It is this precisely that makes it hard to foresee how quickly change will come and the impact that it will have. Yet, even now, it is easy to conclude that the potential for creating a global culture is there, with its attendant opportunities and dangers. Through the radical nature of the technologies, this global culture will challenge existing value systems and national cultures.

There is also much doubt about the claim that the converged media would provide diversity and variety. A look at children’s programming by the United Kingdom’s Broadcasting Standards Commission revealed that the overall amount of time did increase. But the *choice of content available has narrowed*, so that animation now accounts for over one-third of all programming on terrestrial television. Preschool material and drama have suffered. On thematic children’s channels on satellite television, over half of the product is also cartoon material.



Should the converged media be regulated? Debates on regulation issues have raged within the Council of Europe's media group, which looks at ways to increase the access of communities to the new technological opportunities, said Andrea Millwood Hargrave, Research Director of the Broadcasting Standards Commission of the United Kingdom, speaking at the AMIC conference. But it has also become apparent that many Internet service providers (ISPs) want a framework within which to work and they have encouraged the media group to produce a recommendation for all European states to sign up.

At the same time, the proposal to regulate technological convergence has made one important aspect clear: that distinctions between content and carriage are needed. For example, a film and a fax might travel through the same telephone line but their contents are totally different. While a film is for public consumption, a fax is meant to be private. The Internet is, again, different in that it can be looked at as a 'tribal notice board', a library, shopping precinct, an entertainment centre, a bank, a post box." Any regulation will have to consider these differences between such diverse functions and services.

Distinguishing illegal from harmful content is another area that has been much discussed. "Content is not easily standardised," Hargrave said, "so the great challenge is to produce systems that allow customisation by culture, by nationality and by individual belief." She cited interna-

tional attempts that are being made to achieve basic and common standards to define illegal content, notably in the area of child pornography. In fact, there are hotlines in many European countries for the reporting of illegal material and these hotlines work with the police. But harmful content is more difficult in that it is often a matter of taste.

The bottom line however is that the legal requirements need to be tightened to ensure minimum standards of respect for human dignity in issues such as privacy, pornography and the protection of children.

From Hargrave's point of view, "self-regulation by the industry and the accompanying responsibility for standards of service and content should be encouraged and placed upon those who provide the services."

Alongside these, "the individual must be shown the way to self-regulate through education and through access to systems that allow such actions." But, at the same time, the individual "must be able to seek redress for the infringement of privacy or unfairness, for the unreasonable offence against standards, and for the reduction of real choice."

"These are all matters of public good and public policy, requiring an ethical approach to the regulatory framework which is guided not only by commercial considerations but reflects an aspiration for a world where convergence means a forward and positive development for society, where the best journalism and information are available, where creative skills are set free and

made available to the widest possible public."

Indeed, digital or converged media pose a difficult challenge to politicians and regulators. But consumers and citizens should likewise begin to deal with the challenge. The difficulty begins with defining regulation, which should be seen first and foremost as the articulation of common concepts of fairness and democracy. The "profusion of new services and the actual impossibility of censorship or other forms of direct control" make an informed public all the more important. Various researches have shown that television audiences are sophisticated and can differentiate their realities from that being depicted on screen. Even then, greater awareness through media education remains an urgent priority. ☺

Lilian S. Mercado Carreon formerly managed Isis International-Manila's Communications Programme and edited Women in Action. She is now with Oxfam-Great Britain, working to promote the right of marginalised peoples to quality and empowering education.

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