

“From Public Trustees to the Networked Commons: Cultural Citizenship and Competing Frameworks for the Future of Television Regulation”

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As television continues to expand from a broadcast medium to that of cable and the internet, alternative regulatory frameworks have competed to unbox television from its broadcast origins. In assessing these competing frameworks I would like to utilize a critical perspective toward constructs of cultural citizenship that requires consideration of the ways in which regulator rationales operate to produce compliant self-governing citizens for sustaining particular cultural, social and economic relations within capitalist liberal democracies, and either promote or challenge specific power relations across registers of class, gender, sexuality, race and nation. Advertising supported commercial media promote consumer-oriented citizenship in which individual interests, cultural preferences and social needs are best met through purchasing commodities in a free market economy. Public interest media regulations promote good citizenship via commitments to particular cultural values and authorized behavior in the name of national heritage, collective belonging, an informed citizenry, a stable society, decency, local identities and/or democratic participation.

The corporate liberal framework for broadcasting, which invests regulators with fiduciary authority over the public airwaves to hold commercial stations responsible for a susceptible public, developed when an administrative class and cultural critics expressed concern about the power of radio in a “mass society” to promote propaganda and cheap culture. Thus regulators favored well-financed high-powered “quality” commercial stations in the public interest that were to rise above crass commercialism to reconcile white middle class cultural tastes with support for a burgeoning consumer society.

The privatized, neoliberal regulatory framework for cable, which largely treats cable operators as First Amendment-protected private speakers and the public as individual paying consumers, has origins in the elite distaste for television in the postwar period as was evident in the regulatory debates over pay-TV in the 1950s and 1960s which equated the freedom to pay for television with a more democratic culture under assumptions that pay-TV would uplift television culture. The cable access movement challenged this neoliberal framework in promoting a more social democratic conception of television citizenship based on local geographic access, municipal governance and corporate-mandated public subsidy, but is currently threatened by new rules for non-cable video providers.

A “commons” movement of internet enthusiasts has also challenged the neoliberal framework for cable in advocating for government facilitation of nonproprietary control over software, the physical wires/airwaves, and content so that commerce and voluntary nonmarket social production can bloom. However, with cultural origins in a white, affluent countercultural movement looking for alternative societal relations and psychic wholeness steeped in cybernetics systems theory, and a free software movement seeking participatory alternatives to a pacifying old media, the commons movement contains remnants of the mass society critique and a libertarian ethos of minimal government and

self-constituting, volunteer modes of production.

As we consider the larger project of social justice, our deliberations over how new media technologies of television regulation can be unboxed to provide wider democratic participation, we should also consider how beliefs that a participatory media can liberate the people has supported a broader neoliberal politics that reproduces power relations and social stratification.