

A critique of “media governance”

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1. Introduction

The concept of governance has become a central catchword across the social sciences in the last decades, eventually also seeping into our field. Consequently, “media governance” has been one of the most influential notions in the field of media and communication policy in recent years. Although media governance is given varied definitions, and some have called it a “fashion term” (e.g. Kleinstauber, 2007, p. 43), there have also been attempts to develop and employ the concept as a more systematic analytical perspective.

Proponents argue that media governance offers a new theoretically grounded approach for describing, explaining, and criticizing media policy and regulation. Many scholars have seen it as a new way of looking at the diverse modes, actors and levels of governing the media beyond the traditional focus on national governments and formal regulations. Attempts to clarify the nebulous concept of media governance are certainly welcome. However, we argue in this chapter that the governance discourse and its conceptual underpinnings also entail potential pitfalls that we need to recognize and think through.

Our aim is neither to offer an exhaustive review of the burgeoning literature on governance in social sciences, nor to map and assess all of its different uses in media and communication studies. Moreover, rather than rejecting it altogether or offering an alternative analytical term, our aim is to highlight some of the conceptual problems, ambiguities and implicit normative implications of the governance approach and thus raise questions about its added value to our understanding of media and communication policy.

2. Defining media governance

The emergence of governance was influenced by many different disciplinary histories, and the term’s theoretical roots are diverse. As evidenced by its different uses in areas such as economics, international relations, development studies, organizational studies, political

science, public administration, theories of new public management, and post-structuralist or Foucauldian social theories, governance can mean many things in different contexts (e.g. Stoker, 1998, p. 18; Donges, 2007a). Unsurprisingly, then, definitions of governance differ widely as the term is used to cover a variety of aspects and phenomena, seen through different optics.

For some, governance is a descriptive label for a set of loosely associated changes in processes and contexts of public policy-making and regulation (Rhodes, 1996). Others view it as a new theoretical or analytical perspective for grasping these changes (Kooiman, 2003). A further strand aims to inject social and cultural theory to see governance as meaning-making in addition to institutional practice (e.g., Newman, 2005). For yet others, it remains an ideological term associated with neo-liberal de-politicization (Dean, 2007). In a recent handbook, political scientist David Levi-Faur (2012, p. 1) defines governance as

an interdisciplinary research agenda on order and disorder, efficiency and legitimacy all in the context of the hybridization of modes of control that allow for the production of fragmented and multidimensional order *within* the state, *by* the state, *without* the state, and *beyond* the state. (emphasis in original)

This is not only a broad definition, but also one that promises a great potential for new perspectives, new insights and new understandings.

To some extent, these manifold roots and diverse uses are also reflected when we look at media governance¹. There seems to be, however, a general agreement that media governance has something to do with the changing nature of the processes and contexts of media policy-making and regulation. In empirical studies, governance is usually introduced to emphasize the inclusion of different social forces and actors beyond national authorities in the analysis of media policy (e.g., Donges, 2007b; Michalis, 2007; Syvertsen, 2004). Implying “horizontal and vertical extension of government”, it draws attention to different forms of regulation, such as self-regulation, co-regulation and other more informal public-private decision-making processes, and also to different levels of global and regional co-ordination beyond national governments (Puppis, 2010, pp. 139-140).

¹ Our discussion will leave aside the somewhat peculiar fact that “communication governance” has not got much traction as an analytical term (but see Padovani & Tuzzi, 2006), even though many of the processes described by “media governance” within media and communication policy research belong to the domain of communication policy.

In some of the more advanced discussions of the term, however, media governance is not understood as just a descriptive label for these new forms of regulation outside traditional statutory regulation (i.e. government). Instead, as a broad concept, governance goes beyond so-called new forms of regulation to focus on collective coordination and interaction between different social forces (Puppis, 2010, p. 137).

Such a broad notion of media governance draws on what is sometimes called more generally *social-political governance* or *interactive governance* (Kooiman, 2003). Seen as a response (both theoretically and in practice) to “ever growing societal diversity, dynamics and complexity”, governance is understood as “a mix of all kinds of governing efforts by all manner of social-political actors, public as well as private; occurring between them at different levels, in different governance modes and orders” (Kooiman, 2003, p. 3).

This broad understanding of governance now seems to be relatively widely shared in media and communication studies. McQuail (2003, p. 91), for instance, describes media governance as an umbrella term that “covers all means by which the mass media are limited, directed, encouraged, managed, or called into account, ranging from the most binding laws to the most resistible of pressures and self-chosen disciplines.” As such, the term encompasses both policy and regulation, to depict “the sum total of mechanisms, both formal and informal, national and supranational, centralized and dispersed, that aim to organize media systems according to the resolution of media policy debates” (Freedman, 2008, p. 14).

Henceforth, we take the broad definition of media governance as our main point of reference. It is as such an umbrella concept that the authors of this paper have also employed and discussed the term in our work, for example as a starting point for empirical analyses of public service media (e.g. Van Den Bulck and Moe, 2012). Yet, adopting a new terminology also inevitably raises some questions. One issue stems from attempts to turn the ambiguous notion of media governance into a strictly defined analytical concept. The second has to do with the relationship of governance to the more established key terms of politics, policy and regulation. Thirdly, we discuss the ideological connotations and implicit normative underpinnings of the governance approach.

3. Conceptual ambiguity

Despite ambitious attempts to clarify the scope and meaning of media governance, it remains a slippery term. When we deal with such abstract terms, meant to communicate more or less

controversial ideas, ambiguity is in many ways a given. Existing key concepts within our field such as policy and regulation are of course also ambiguous, much due to a long history containing a variety of approaches and connotations. The question is, rather, if governance as a newcomer in our toolbox brings added value or further confuses the field.

Works taking stock of the uses of media governance and its definitions (e.g., Puppis, 2010; Donges, 2007a, 2007b) have come a long way. The volume edited by Donges (2007c), to single out one contribution, not only acknowledges the term's varied uses and diverse disciplinary roots, but also explores its different meanings in quite different contexts. Several studies explore nuanced, multi-dimensional notions of governance and apply these in empirical analyses (e.g., Meier & Trappel, 2007; Thomass, 2007 for innovative contributions).

Despite attempts at clarification, media governance combines different elements in ways that are not always easy to distinguish from each other. According to Donges (2007b, p. 329), governance can be understood as a descriptive term, an analytical approach, a normative concept, and even as a practical instrument of media regulation. As Puppis (2010, p. 141) argues, on the one hand, governance describes the entirety of rules that make up the regulatory structure, but on the other hand, it is also a way of viewing the world of politics and government – an analytical concept that offers a new perspective (Puppis, 2010, p. 139). However, another problem arises from the latter meaning of the term.

Puppis argues that the analytical governance concept can be used in various contexts in order to explain different aspects of the regulatory structure. When developing media governance into a theoretically grounded analytical approach, however, Puppis ties the governance approach to the particular theoretical framework of new institutionalism. At the same time, he stresses that the governance approach is theoretically open and can be useful for various other theoretical perspectives (Puppis 2010, p. 145). Consequently, Puppis wants to have his cake and eat it too. That can be hard.

New institutionalism does indeed provide one theoretically grounded approach for analysing media policy, widely used, with or without a governance approach. Despite his call for theoretical openness, Puppis singles out “institutional way of thinking” (Puppis 2010, p. 143). The actual employment of media governance as an analytical term in studies that employ, for instance, a critical political economy approach, various constructivist approaches, or other more critical perspectives remains somewhat unclear. As of now, it seems that the term is

used quite differently than, for instance, in the radical poststructuralist versions of governance theory outside media studies.

If the concept fits all theoretical approaches and can be combined with any existing approach of media policy analysis, how does it constitute a new analytical approach? If media governance by itself does not involve any theoretical commitments, does that not bring us back to the definition of governance as a descriptive catchword?

In sum, there is an inherent ambiguity to media governance as both an empirical object and an analytical term. In building a clearly defined analytical concept that should also fit different theoretical frameworks, media governance is in danger of being overstretched. The latter problem leads to a dilemma: if too narrowly tied to certain theoretical approach, the concept loses some of its usefulness as a broad framework. Yet, if broad definitions and openness are adopted in terms of the theoretical possibilities, we are left with nothing more than a general catchword for the changing nature of policy-making.

A related ambiguity has to do with linguistic differences and cultural contexts. In English-language settings, the term governance is entrenched in the vocabulary of officials and policy practitioners. However, in other social and linguistic settings, governance does not exist as a word: While in some cases, governance is widespread as an English loanword, elsewhere it is not. It is absent from Norwegian discourse on the media, for instance, and the Norwegian language has no equivalent. On an analytical level, Syvertsen has suggested “samfunnsmessig styring av mediene” (“societal control of the media”) as a translation of media governance (Syvertsen, 2004). No “agreed translation” exists in Hebrew (Levi-Faur, 2012, p. 4). In Finnish, to take another example, governance is often translated in academic discourses as “hallinta”, which is derived from “hallinto” (administration), and covers some but not all of the connotations of governance.

Leaving aside the question of the form of actual governance procedures in these different contexts (see e.g. Kleinsteuber, 2007), it should be clear that such differences on the empirical level lead to ambiguities on the analytical level. In addition to the different uses of media governance by scholars and practitioners, the conceptual ambiguity is multiplied when translated to other languages and cultural contexts. This, then, triggers further questions about the analytical added value that the governance approach offers, in contrast to other approaches in media policy studies.

4. Relationship of governance to politics, policy and regulation

There is a tendency to stack up governance as a broader concept against narrower terms such as media policy and regulation, which are seen to refer only to government control. These concepts too, however, can be understood in different ways and combined with diverse theoretical approaches. The depiction of media policy and regulation as outmoded or necessarily narrow concepts, as implied in the governance literature, may thus set up something of a straw man.

Media policy, too, has a somewhat uncertain identity, both as a research object and as an analytical term.² As Sandra Braman (2004) has argued, the boundaries of the field of media policy (as a research object) are increasingly difficult to discern. This is due to several reasons. Noting the “unusually large numbers of players, types of players and decision-making venues”, Braman (2004, pp. 168-169) has explicitly argued that “media policy” should include not only public policies but also decisions made in different arenas, including informal and private strategies. Similarly, Des Freedman (2008, p. 13, emphasis in original) argues that media policy should be defined “as a process that concerns the interaction between different *actors*, the *institutional structures* within which they work and the *objectives* that they pursue”. Accordingly, media policy analysis has also been inclusive of a variety of different approaches and methods, signalling that the phenomena discussed under “media governance” are by no means excluded from current definitions and analyses of “media policy”.

Furthermore, the term *regulation* is not necessarily tied to statutory regulation only³. Aside from established notions of self- and co-regulation, regulation has been used to refer even more broadly to phenomena such as market regulation, moral regulation, and other kinds of power structures and forces that shape media and culture (e.g. Thompson, 1997).

Neo-Marxist and Gramscian “regulation theories” have focused on the relationship between the economy and culture, understanding regulation as the shaping of culture in conformity with the political-economic demands of capitalism (Thompson, 1997, p. 5). Stuart Hall (1997, p. 229) also questioned the simple dichotomy between state/regulation and market/freedom to

² “Media policy”, of course, was also a new term at one point. In the Norwegian context, for instance, while different media have been under societal control for centuries, the term “mediepolitikk” only emerged around 1980 as the regulation of all media was sought connected within one common policy framework (Østbye, 1995, p. 37).

³ It is worth noting that “regulation” can have different connotations in different languages (see e.g. Kleinsteuber, 2007 on the history and meaning of “Regulierung” in (West-)Germany).

highlight how the market also regulates by allocating resources, creating incentives, distinct organizational cultures, rules and expectations, and norms.

Finally, media governance can be contrasted with the notion of *media politics*. While both media governance and media politics appear as broad approaches that take into account formal and informal processes, they have different identities. In contrast to media governance, which emphasizes institutions and rules, and their influence on the behaviour of media organizations, the term media politics refers especially to struggles over meanings, values and normative definitions of the role of media in society in a way that includes also the informal level of criticism and debate about media performance and structure (McQuail, 1997, p. 42). "Critical media politics" or "politics of the media" often serve as headings for an explicitly critical or radical disciplinary identity. Instead of "elite political institutions, agents and processes", they signify theoretical approaches that accept the value embedded nature of all governing practices and embrace normative, ethical, and reflexive evaluations (see Phelan & Dahlberg, 2011, pp. 5-6).

All in all, overemphasis on what is new about media governance may include the risk that these earlier (or simultaneous, but unconnected) discussions of the same problems and phenomena remain ignored. While the rich and varied literature on governance offers also perspectives that addresses issues of power in ways akin to the alternative conceptions of politics and regulation described above, arguably this potential for a more disruptive or critical approach of media governance does not show up in the dominant discourse within media policy research (but see e.g. Lunt and Livingstone, 2012).

5. Is governance ideological?

In identifying new forms of regulation, it can be asked if media governance implicitly promotes certain political and administrative practices. In emphasizing new kinds regulatory arrangements, such as self-regulation, co-regulation and other so-called soft governance tools, we may end up suggesting that these mechanisms are better than the old ones, that they offer a way to bypass some problems associated with other modes of governing. Even if presented as a descriptive, value-free term, governance may thus imply not only a growing awareness but also acceptance of these different modes of governance. As Mitchell Dean (2007, p. 50) argues, the emphasis on governance may imply "a set of prescriptions in favour of a narrative of the rise of network forms of organization and around the decline of state capacities".

Most proponents of media governance are well aware of these problems. According to Puppis (2010, p. 137), for example, these kinds of worries apply when media governance is used in a narrow sense, as “an ideologically laden label for allegedly new and better forms of regulation, which implies that regulatory reform is inevitable due to government failure and a variety of social, economic, and technological changes”. Adopting a broad conception, however, alleviates some of these concerns and avoids the neoliberal narrative distinguishing between “bad” government and “good” governance involving a minimal state (Puppis, 2010, p. 137).

It can be argued though that even when media governance is divorced from its ideologically laden uses and understood as a broader analytical approach, it is hardly value-free. As a new analytical framework, a governance approach is probably best understood not as a completely new theory. Rather, its potential lies in providing a new perspective, which at best makes us reflect on old phenomena differently. The governance approach provides a language and a frame of reference, which may lead researchers to ask questions that might not otherwise occur (Stoker, 1998, p. 18). Yet, no language or vocabulary is ever neutral in a sense that all conceptual frameworks and vocabularies encourage some types of research questions and perspectives more than others. The current mainstream of media governance literature often employs key terms such as rationality, efficiency, responsiveness and performance, which invoke a rather instrumental imagination, in contrast to the vocabulary of critical media politics, such as power and hegemony. As Puppis (2010, p. 145) notes, a governance approach tends to feature an orientation towards “solving problems”. As a result, much of the discourse is more concerned with the administrative and process-oriented aspects of governing and less with antagonism between different ideologies and unequal relationships of power.

According to critics like Mitchell Dean (2007), theorists of governance have underestimated the continued force of the *political*. By flattening out power relations and conflicts into a discourse of networks, flows, and complexity, the political character of all governing tends to “fade into grey in the drab world of governance” (Dean, 2007, p. 14; also e.g. Offe, 2008). The avoidance of values and the political can make policy research inherently conservative and incapable of offering any alternatives to established ways of thinking (see Fischer, 2003).

This is of course not inevitable and there is nothing in the concept of media governance that makes it inherently incompatible with critical analysis of power and politics. Many who have employed the governance approach have explicitly emphasized that their understanding of governance is not apolitical (e.g., Michalis, 2007). The “institutional thinking”, promoted

among others by Puppis (2010, p. 143) also acknowledges the role of values and ideas by noting that institutions and rules can also refer to values, norms and taken-for-granted assumptions. However, focus still seems to be on the restrictive or even determining effects of institutional and organizational cultures and habits, rather than opening up new perspectives for fundamental criticism or the contestation of ideas as a form of politics itself (see Fischer 2003, pp. 27-31).

As a concept or an approach, media governance does not exclude critical consideration of power and politics. But vocabularies and analytical frameworks always have their conceptual baggage, so those working from the premise that policies, regulations and rules even in their technocratic forms are always political, have a task at hand in redirecting the use of governance within our field.

6. Conclusion

We have attempted to uncover some of assumptions and implications of the emergence and proliferation of media governance as an analytical concept in media and communication studies. Given its various uses by different actors, it is doubtful that a common understanding of media governance would arise. Rather than a concept that can be conclusively defined, it can be argued that media governance is perhaps best viewed as an “essentially contested concept” that is inherently subject to endless revisions and interpretations (see Gallie, 1956). Like many other concepts in political thought, its meaning cannot be settled by logic alone but will always remain open-ended. The idea that we should agree on one meaning of the concept is thus not very fruitful. Views on the usefulness of media governance as a theoretical approach depend greatly on what we expect it to do for us. Even if it remains a catchword, media governance may serve a useful purpose in highlighting some aspects of the changing nature of policy-making processes. Debating the concept of media governance may also lead to interesting theoretical and methodological discussions in their own right.

If so, the main questions concern the underpinnings of the concept in each instance of use, and the analytical surplus the concept itself brings. Based on our discussion of these issues, it seems that, from the wide range of strands of thought on offer in the general literature on governance, media governance has been mostly formed and used in a way that fails to fulfil its promises. This does not mean that media governance is doomed as an analytical concept. Its short history within our field also signals that novel valuable approaches might emerge. Still, ultimately, we would argue that the toolbox of media and communication policy

research needs historical awareness, ethical and political relevance, better connections with other fields, and probably many other things at least as much as it needs the terminology of media governance as a new overarching perspective.

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