Continentalizing Canadian Telecommunications: The Politics of Regulatory Reform. 

While Canadian telecom policy researchers and teachers will be familiar with much of the ground covered in Vanda Rideout’s *Continentalizing Canadian Telecommunications*, they will nevertheless appreciate the book’s timely appearance: while our telecommunication regime has been utterly transformed over the past two decades, no other comprehensive account of the forces that shaped these recent changes has yet been published. Certainly Rideout’s work should find an immediate and continuing place as a text in Canadian telecom policy courses.

Rideout’s account of this history is set in the context of the drive for continental economic integration. This process is central to contemporary changes in many other sectors, including, for example, energy and auto manufacturing, and lies at the heart of a wide range of domestic political conflicts. The telecommunication sector represents not only one more large industry targeted for continental integration, but also one of the central tools for carrying it out, a basic infrastructure of commerce necessary to further integrationist reform across the Canadian economy.

Rideout traces the policy and regulatory stages by which the co-operation of the Canadian state with large domestic and international corporations has been secured toward the end of building the infrastructure of a particular vision of the “information society.” This vision as it applies to communication is of course the neo-liberal vision of trade liberalization of telecom and data services, oligopolistic competition, and abandonment of explicit public-interest criteria of regulation. Rideout notes that integration is to be distinguished from harmonization, in the sense that some distinct features of the regulatory regimes in Canada and the U.S. are maintained, while both integration and harmonization embrace neo-liberal market forces and the program of reduced trade barriers, capital mobility, strengthened corporate rights, and relaxed merger and acquisition restrictions entailed by the neoliberal program. Contemporary developments in the telecommunication sector, such as the push to relax foreign ownership limits, continue to confirm Rideout’s analytical framework.

Replacing the antecedent national industrial development strategy in telecommunication with this new international market-driven approach required a greater centralization of regulatory power at the federal level. One of the strengths of Rideout’s treatment is that it shows in detail how this centralization of power was carried out and how it has been deployed. Probably the most controversial aspect of her achievement here is the evidence she has adduced to show that the Canadian government has intentionally used this power “to confuse and silence opposition to the neoliberal telecommunications project, aimed at keeping the opposing groups divided or at keeping them from forming broader alliances with small businesses and the provincial governments” (p. 11).

Another strength of Rideout’s book is her explicit use of a critical political economy approach to policy analysis. This places her work firmly within the widely cited and muscular tradition of Canadian political economy of communication, and among a corpus of critical political economy-inspired Canadian telecommunications studies by Robert Babe, Dwayne Winseck, Dallas Smythe, William Melody, Vincent Mosco, and others. As with other exemplars of this historically informed approach, the explanatory power of the analysis is augmented by its systematic and activist-oriented attention to the actions of marginalized popular movements and organizations as well as those of powerful elites. While Rideout’s assessment of the importance of popular forces in this case may be debated, the importance of including them in a comprehensive analysis cannot.
Several issues need more attention than Rideout has given them, and it’s not clear why they have been given such vestigial treatment. First, her account of the transition from a system of regulated monopolies to a “competitive” telecommunications regime accepts the latter description as adequate and fails to distinguish the various forms of competition toward which policymakers might have crafted their new regulatory regime, or to describe and critique more explicitly the theory of oligopolistic competition that has prevailed. More attention to this issue would yield additional immanent grounds for criticism of contemporary Canadian state policy in this sector (for example, in the weaknesses of its welfare claims, or its occlusion of both positive and negative externalities), as well as a powerful linkage, at a theoretical level, to other bodies of scholarship critiquing the whole neo-liberal program.

Second, only a very thin account of the history and implications of technological “convergence” is offered here, despite its intricate relationship to every element of the policy history Rideout recounts. One example of the importance of convergence in the policy setting is its role as a rationale for the uncontested abandonment of the content/carriage separation doctrine, even though this single element alone threatens wholesale damage to fundamental and long-standing Canadian cultural policy goals and to the diversity of voices publicly audible in Canadian political and cultural spaces.

Third, there is no discussion at all of telecommunication standard-setting processes, where preferred uses and potentialities of new communication technologies are stabilized and imbedded in material form, important industrial opportunities created for some actors, barriers erected for others, and competing visions of our technological future foreclosed. This is an institutional process parallel to, but far more invisible than, the deliberations of the CRTC, and it is at least equally implicated in the rollout of a neo-liberal vision of the “information society” and the cementing of the influence of global corporations on the daily lives of ordinary citizens.

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