BOOK REVIEW – *GOVERNING EUROPEAN COMMUNICATIONS: FROM UNIFICATION TO COORDINATION*, BY MARIA MICHALIS (2007) LEXINGTON BOOKS: LANHAM, ISBN 9780739117354

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In her landmark work, Dr Maria Michalis provides a historical account of the evolution of European communications governance during the post-Second World War era, from the late 1940s through to 2007. Throughout the historical journey, the book considers European Union (EU) communications governance in the context of global political and economic developments.

The work is segmented into five historical eras covered by five chapters. The first, from the 1940s to the late 1960s are the formative years, during which time European cooperation in television and telecommunications was beginning to take shape. The second era – the crises – spans the period from the late 1960s to the 1970s. Amidst the turmoil in the international political economy, Europe was becoming concerned about how it was taking second place to the United States in technological advances. This gave rise to a technological gap discourse which was used to invoke the need for European collaboration. From the 1970s to the mid-1980s, the EU emerged as an actor in ICT in a period of "defensive Europeanisation." The period from the mid-1980s to late 1990s became more intense in market restructuring, regulatory reform and Europeanisation of communication policies. In the last and contemporary phase from the 1990s to 2007, European governance of communications takes place amidst growing information and communication technological convergence, and thus with EU governance advancing sector neutral (horizontal) regulation including advancing general competition rules.

The most recent era is the more pertinent in gleaning Michalis' insights around the latest developments in European governance. These tend towards efforts to accelerate the knowledge economy (the European term for the information society), which entail revising EU electronic communication regulatory frameworks for telecommunications and television. The characteristic EU governance tactic is to streamline regulation in lieu of fully liberalised and technologically converged communication markets. The institution, as Michalis observes, is increasingly opting away from vertically driven directives and legally binding harmonisation towards policy coordination through non-binding instruments.

It is obviously worthwhile to extract some lessons from the European regional regulatory framework and relate these to other emerging models, especially in the African context. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), via the ECOWAS Treaty, is looking towards policy harmonisation similar to the EU model. If the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region is also looking towards the EU model, there are some cautionary notes on EU policy and regulation which are worth mentioning.

First, contrary to the EU's 1997 Green Paper on Convergence, subsequent policy evolution apparently did not bridge telecommunications and broadcasting sectors. Rather, electronic communications policy and audio-visual policy appear to have evolved separately. Essentially, as Michalis observes, EU electronic communications policy has been more about regulating

markets and competition than technology. Economic issues are a key thrust in electronic communications policy while broadcasting advances the socio-cultural domain.

There is cause for hesitation around emulating a policy framework for SADC that is more concerned about the expanding regional ICT market than about technology. For instance, there are great disparities across economic profiles, with countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo having recently emerged from wars that decimated ICT infrastructure. Policy frameworks are needed that would speak strongly to the rollout of ICT infrastructure for regional integration. Convergence policy must be as much as about advancing technology access as about markets or competition (industry convergence) in the SADC. If for ICT regulation the SADC regional community should move in the direction of regionalism, it would seem pragmatic to entrust policy with initiatives that promote ICT infrastructure access. The pooling of ICT resources to ensure a benefit for various countries in regional integration is key. The most notable advancements in this regard, discussed at the Communications Regulators' Association of Southern Africa (CRASA), have been around harmonising numbering and spectrum resources.

Michalis observes that the EU regime tends towards non-legally binding soft policy measures that are concerned with correcting or shaping the market. Even though these are applied, the European market continues to be fragmented by diverse national rules. She further notes that the loosely configured policies and "the absence of strong enforcement tools make non-observance highly likely" (p.291) by European states.

The overall verdict is that the current phase of European governance of communication, in addition to being complex, "has become more pluralistic and more institutionalised but at the same time more dispersed, lacking a clear locus of authority and power and obscuring lines of accountability and transparency" (p.293).

Should this be appealing to SADC? It is definitely a model that has its challenges. A blight on the EU arrangement is that the community has certain interests to advance at the European level (to be a regional buffer against globalisation pressures), while at national level member states seek to advance their own economic interests. Finding the middle ground to balance these tensions, while the various countries must also respond to global political economic developments, is a key challenge. The resulting symptoms are therefore a fragmented European market and the lack of a linear progression towards Europeanisation of regulatory policies highlighted by Michalis. What is commendable is the EU's dynamism in frequently revisiting policies and re-examining regulatory frameworks. During any given year, there are copious policy documents being discussed and contemplated on European-wide ICT issues. For the SADC region this means institutional arrangements for policy and regulation must be well organised and have agility to move as technological advancements necessitate.

Michalis's book provides a compelling insight into both the evolution of the EU communications governance system and its historical path in the context of broader political economic global developments. However, this reader would have hoped for more attention to the institutional behaviour and nuances of the European Union in governing communications. The work seemed to stray too far in the context, which is no doubt influential, rather than roaming intimately beneath the skin of the EU regulatory institutions. However, this is rescued by an appendix synthesising the changing characteristics and governance styles as well as governance instruments in European institutions throughout the eras documented in the book.   ❑