

# Is There Still a Need to Regulate the Television Industry in the Digital Age?

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## Abstract

In media industry, the digital-led convergence supported by satellite network and the Internet has facilitated new opportunities and new market, especially in television industry, which is the most significant and indispensable in human's everyday life. Under the complicated media environment, it is more than essential to discuss whether it is necessary to regulate the television industry as the public media channel. This article firstly explores the diversity of TV programs with examples, then the impact of the Internet and new media platforms are mentioned, and finally the intrinsic characteristics of television industry and the limitation of market control are introduced respectively.

## Keywords

Television Industry, Digital Convergence, Regulation, Compensation, Public Goods

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## 1. Introduction

With the development of digital technology, there has been a significant change in people's everyday life. The advancement of digitization has facilitated diversity of television channels, providing audiences with more choices thus making their life more colorful. In media field, generally speaking, unlike print media such as newspapers, digital television conveys information through sounds as well as pictures, which can impress audiences deeply with verisimilitude and infectivity (Wang, 2008), showing the organic combination mode of traditional media and new technological means. But meanwhile, TV program, as a kind of artistic work, its soul is creative content. In today's era of pursuing content as the king, should TV industry be restricted, or will this regulation restrict the creative inspiration of producers? Moreover, the shock from the Internet and the impact on keeping its basic attribute should not be ignored as well.

## 2. Development of Digital TV

In the digital age, the rapid development and popularization of digital television may arouse a mess in media market due to the diversity of TV programs it provides, and therefore, government reconsidering the regulations for television industry and compensating for the limitations of commercial market is a must (Freedman, 2008). Moreover, families who own digital televisions are able to enjoy hundreds of channels regardless of contents with more freedom (Zhu, 2010). In essence, most of TV channel producers are for-profit organizations and thereby producing programs with low-quality content such as violence and pornography, in order to cater for taste of audiences and pursue commercial profit. As a result, there is a likelihood that television industry may lose its intrinsic function of education and even undermine the physical and psychological well-being of adolescents and thereby exerting a bad impact on the whole social morality due to the strong infectivity it owns.

## 3. Online Television Platforms Development

In essence, the Internet is an interactive platform (Świerczyńska-Głownia & Sławińska, 2015) with a diversity of information from all over the world involved, which could increase the complexity in media environment (Rosenblatt, 2009), because people have more freedom to choose the channels as they prefer (Gu, 2007) and it is much more convenient to watch their preferred program by just inputting the keyword online. Under this circumstance, government regulation becomes more than necessary.

In recent years, network drama has become more and more popular in China, which, to some extent, can be considered as a shock for television programs with a migration of audiences to online media (Freedman, 2008). Because audiences are capable of choosing whichever episode of network drama on the Internet or on some applications such as Youku, instead of just watching whatever SARFT (The State Administration of Radio Film and Television) allows to be released. Nevertheless, on account of the commercial nature of the Internet, the main purpose of network drama producers is to attract audiences by various means to make profits instead of offering public service. Besides, due to the commercial pursuit, most of the network drama producers usually tend to save their cost and boost yield without considering the quality as well as the significance of their products thus most of the network drama being lack of educational meanings. Therefore, these factors have led to a mess in media industry, in particular, the TV audience rating in has been influenced evidently. In order to address this issue, government is supposed to build a balanced regulation between commercial and social in this digital age. Youtube provides an excellent example, using the Internet as one of the viewing ways of TV contents, in other words, considering the Internet as effective supplement of the television (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). Actually, Youtube, which has developed rapidly in the 2000s, is “a new hybrid cultural form” (Hesmondhalgh, 2013: p. 351), keeping the TV channels well or-

ganized and supervised by government and owning the interactivity of the Internet at the same time, therefore, people can choose their favourite channels under the regulation. Youtube has got acceptance of authorities all over the world such as the BBC in UK (Ofcom, 2015), as it provides a feasible direction for TV industry under the digitization.

#### 4. Substantive Characteristics of Television Industry

Generally speaking, television products own the characteristic of public goods and thereby being able to cause wide social effects, which decides that TV industry should be controlled by the government to some degree in any environment.

In the digital age, as a limited national resource and public utility, TV industry should play a role of a guider better to be responsible for the public (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). The PSB in UK, which is now considered as a central of national culture and common agenda (Schlesinger, 2016), is a case of that. Moreover, in terms of its pursuit, main purpose of TV industry is to provide public service rather than commercial profit, just as Freedman mentioned, they should treat audiences primarily as citizens instead of consumers and provide some educational program to benefit the public. As a consequence, it is the obligation for TV industry to accept government regulations. And the government regulation does not mean the TV industry must serve political purpose but the public purpose (Enli & Syvertsen, 2016).

### 5. Government Regulation

#### 5.1. Government Regulation in Different Countries

From historical view, no matter in liberal democracy countries or authoritarian countries, the majority of their television organizations are owned or controlled by the government, even the US is not an exception. Because the TV broadcasting is powerful and thus in need of control by the state. Nowadays, in terms of total time consumption and revenue, TV industry is still the most influential and significant in every territory all over the world (Świerczyńska-Głownia & Sławińska, 2015). By 2009, Americans had spent averagely 1774 hours watching TV and this figure has kept increasing in recent years. And there has been a similar trend for TV viewing figures in UK where people utilizes various ways such as online platforms to watch TV programs (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). In a word, the potential social impact that TV programs exert on the public may beyond imagination. And plus the development of digitization, the impact is likely to be amplified. Therefore, government should tight the regulations in case of the abuse of potential power.

The UK has good foundation of government regulation in television industry, owning a relatively well-integrated regulation system based on the Communications Act 2003 (Doyle & Douglas, 2005). In this system, Ofcom, which is set up in 2002, is the main regulatory institution, carrying out regulation in both quality and quantity of television programs (Hu, 2013). Under the digitization envi-

ronment, in terms of the quality, it means high requirements for television channels, requiring them to provide high-quality news, events and television dramas. The quantity means Ofcom strictly controls the proportions of television programs such as various types of television dramas and TV shows. In addition, in order to keep up with the digital age, the scope of Ofcom's regulation is likely to be broadened (Schlesinger, 2016), such as having more powers to be in charge of periodical reviews of the PSB system (Ofcom, 2015) and to investigate every aspect of BBC services (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2016). And recently, UK plans to switch fully to digital television under combination with market and broadcasting industry, which could address the digital trend appropriately, to some extent (Starks, 2007).

China also makes good use of the characteristic of television as public goods, especially in the digital age. Although different provinces in China own their own TV channels and fierce competition is also existing (Hu, 2013), the party state, has introduced various reforms to keep close control over all the domestic TV channels (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). And in recent years, the reforms have become stricter on account of complexity in media market caused by digitization. Historically, Chinese government used to have a good record of regulating the television industry though sometimes the regulation is so strict that may like a media control.

For instance, nowadays, there is an increasing number of TV dramas appearing on the screen. Chinese government has noticed prevalent dramas are likely to be a potentially effective educational tool (Świerczyńska-Głównia & Sławińska, 2015), and thus carrying out a relatively close control over these programs. Plenty of policies in association with TV dramas have been introduced, for example, the content of pregnant is forbidden in youth dramas and youth films, and the content of existing of real ghost is forbidden in Chinese horror dramas and horror films, and so on. All these policies are designed to help citizens to build right cognitive system and facilitate social culture development in right direction (Hu, 2013). If there were no such strict regulations, Chinese TV industry may have become a mess with an overflow of low-quality programs and may lose its intrinsic functions. Actually, audiences are the victims and meanwhile, the overflow of low-quality TV programs is a waste of media resource.

Under the digitization trend, China and Britain, as countries with socialist cultural system and capitalist countries, have taken effective measures respectively to ensure the diversity of content to a certain extent and standardize the operation rules of TV industry, providing models for other countries.

## **5.2. Government Regulation as Compensation for the Market**

The TV industry has taken up limited national resources, this characteristic decides that market regulation over this industry may not take effect sometimes even market failure is inevitable now and then. Actually, there is nothing wrong with the media market itself (Hesmondhalgh, 2013), it is the intrinsic nature as

well as commercial purpose of the market system that decides effective resources allocation could not be achieved especially in the digital age when competition in the market is fiercer. In addition, it is also hard to for market system to realize the goals that are beneficial to society such as the quality of programs and advertisements due to its commercial pursuit (Wang, 2008).

In media market, the television program producers pursuing their profits is market behaviour while the tastes of audience are their individual factors, neither of them can be altered. Nevertheless, as the supervisor of market, government is supposed to tight regulations to make compensation for market failure in television industry. Only in this way, could the direction of TV industry development be virtuous, thus providing an efficient, fair as well as equitable market environment (Hu, 2013). And in the mean time, the state is capable of controlling digitization process and making good use of it to offer various programs to satisfy cultural needs of the public in case of bad notions such as consumerism culture penetrating into citizens' minds (Zhao, 1998).

In a word, what government should do is to assist TV industry to achieve a balance between the market and politic power. A case of that is the close guidance for new media development in the digital age in China (Wu & Wei, 2011). And in Korea, the state also addresses this balance well in different ways. For instance, similar to the management mode of film industry, television programs such as TV shows as well as dramas will be graded as different levels according to their contents. TV programs at different levels own different access to releasing, which can restrain the adverse impact of vulgarization of TV program contents, to some extent. And in terms of detrimental contents, high-tech means could be utilized in this digital society to block them out (Hu, 2013). Actually, the vulgarization of TV program contents is driven by commercial profits, the classification policy that Korea government implements is flexible enough to achieve a balance between economic benefit and political control as government regulation here is used as a compensation and frame of the market instead of a complete forbiddance of commercial program factors. Thus, in particular in a digital society, it is necessary for the state to keep a balance between facilitating market competition orderly to some extent to ensure the diversity of TV programs, and keeping the development of TV industry in correct direction.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has overviewed the necessity of government regulation over the television industry in the digital age mainly in four aspects with examples in different countries. In the information time, the rapid development of digital convergence and the Internet platforms have facilitated the increase in TV channels and thereby promoting the diversity of programs while exerting some potential adverse impact on the society, which may become the culprit to social management at the same time.

The diversity of television channels in competitive media market has provided

more choices and more convenience for the audiences while some detrimental cultural contents such as violence may be harmful for audiences both physical and mental well-being especially for the adolescents. In addition, with the development of online television platforms, there have been more different means for viewing the TV programs on the Internet such as by the Youtube. On the other hand, though the dominant position of the television industry in media field does not be threatened, the audience rating of traditional TV programs that are actually well supervised by the state is decreasing, to some degree. In essence, it is the substantive characteristics of television industry that it should be controlled by the government as it is powerful public goods and public service supplier. Moreover, because the intrinsic nature of the market is pursuing commercial profits, the benefits for the public could not be considered, to some extent.

Therefore, given these factors, there is still a need to regulate the television industry under the guidance of government and utilize the digital technology properly to achieve a balance to facilitate a sound development. Specifically, the relevant departments should improve the regulations designed for harmful content and encourage original content, promoting high-quality TV products on multiple platforms. And in order to ensure the reception rate of TV educational information, TV stations ought to control the proportion of different channels and reasonably allocate audience time.

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### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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