

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

**VANDA RIDEOUT, *Continentalizing Canadian Telecommunications: The Politics of Regulatory Reform*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003, xiii + 270 p.**

*Continental Canadian Telecommunications* is about major telecom policy reformation in the past two decades, put into context by first recounting how the telecommunications industry developed its early roots in Canada. The author embraces a critical sociological perspective when assessing the impact of politically and economically motivated decisions that have transformed regulatory policy in recent years.

Rideout begins with an investigative narration of all the figures that participated in the political struggles that shifted Canada from a Fordist telecom regime to a continental one. The author goes into great detail on how influential powers were united toward a common agenda, combining capital, the state (provincial), labour, and popular forces to this end.

The continentalization of Canadian telecommunications was a complicated process that the government felt was necessary to avoid economic isolation. Service policy and regulatory changes mirroring those of the United States were considered vital to international expansion of the market. This involved an integration of all the service components underlying global capital activity, as the providing of such services is crucial to keep abreast with the expanding global operations of advanced electronic capitalism.

Rideout argues that the neo-liberal telecommunications model, one characterized by liberalization, privatization, and neo-regulation, developed in the context of continentalism in Canada. Aspects of this transference include a competitive market for telecom services, the privatization of federally and publicly owned telecommunications utilities, operations and network, and conditions that the author defines as *neo-regulation*. The latter would include little or no public oversight of telecom service activity and a general reliance on market or self regulation.

The author gives careful consideration to how business forces, experts, and federal departments and agencies garnered hegemonic consent for those changes towards continentalization. Rideout argues that the federal government was not a neutral player in setting the agenda for telecom trade and policy reform. She describes how the federal government allocated

network interconnection access to promote the shift of ownership so as to centralize the telecommunications industry to federal jurisdiction. This involved the elimination of as many intra-province telecom owner-provider companies as possible, so that policies reforms would affect the majority of the telecommunications industry.

The purpose of this book is to help the reader develop a deeper critical understanding of the politics of regulatory reform. Considering the complexity of the various situations and the variety of different companies, organizations, commissions, committees, institutions that contribute to the process, the book does an excellent job of sorting through the interchanges and outcomes. A familiarity with Canadian industries and political organizations is not required, as the book contains several tables, charts, and appendices that include lists of acronyms for various entities. While these abbreviated references take a little time getting familiarized with, they are not overwhelming and more than serve their purpose.

The Telecommunication Act of 1992 and signing NAFTA are attributed as actions that brought about policy reform. Corporate users interested in globalization applied political pressure to liberalize and deregulate to conform to American telecom systems were a factor as well. The general fear existed that the Canadian telecom industry might lose a major portion of corporate user cross-over business to American service providers if policy conformities and network share service integration were not complete.

Rideout points to the important and often unnoticed role that multinational business forces played in changing telecom policy behind the scenes. The concerns of these Canadian corporate telecom service users included cheaper rates and the ability to select from competing providers to attain the delivery services or products best suited for their needs. The parallels and similarities of Canadian and American policy reform are also pointed out.

The highlight of this book is the detailed attention given to those opposing policy reform and the social impact that such change has had and that continuing effect on many Canadians. Much time is devoted to telling the other side of the story, often one where tenacious policy resistance was selectively overlooked, the ignoring of social needs in favor of attaining economic ends. The negative impact that the neo-liberal telecommunications policy shift has had on low-income and rural and remote telephone subscribers is graphically detailed in charts that show a decreasing trend in subscriber figures.

Survey results also indicate that more expensive telephone rates are having an adverse effect on many Canadians. The implication here is that a form of inequity not unlike the digital divide is disconnecting and disadvantaging population groups, particularly those with low income. The evidence suggests that adoption of such a free-trade telecom policy does

not take into consideration the social needs of a substantial portion of Canadians, accordingly.

The debate between free trade and fair trade has been an ongoing one amongst economists, with fair trade in this application affording the less privileged population access to affordable universal telephone service. Canadian public-interest advocates and consumer organizations fought to maintain affordability and universality, while maintaining that subsidies were an effective way to regulate and control rates.

This book does an excellent job of documenting the historical progression of the policy-making influences and political activities that eventually integrated Canadian telecommunications into a North American continental regime. It contains information of use to those interested in sociology, economics, and politics, as well as anyone that might be interested in studying the effects of policymaking on diverse populations.

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