Changing Influences on the Concept of ‘Media Influence’

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ABSTRACT

The concept of media influence has a long history in media and communication studies, and has also had significant influence on public policy. This paper revisits questions of media influence through three short case studies. First, it critically analyses the strongly partisan position of News Corporation’s newspapers against the Labor government during the 2013 Australian Federal election to consider whether the potential for media influence equated to the effective use of media power. Second, it discusses the assumption in broadcasting legislation, in both the UK and Australia, that terrestrial broadcasting should be subject to more content regulation than subscription services, and notes the new challenges arising from digital television and over-the-top video streaming services. Finally, it discusses the rise of multi-platform global content aggregators such as Google, Apple, Microsoft and others, and how their rise necessitates changes in ways of thinking about concentration of media ownership, and regulations that may ensue from it.
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Media Influence as a Key Concept in Media and Communication Studies and Media Policy

The concept of media influence has a venerable history in both media and communications studies and in public policy. Many of the key debates of media and communications studies have revolved around the question of how, and in what circumstances, media institutions, practices and content can be said to influence society, politics and culture. McQuail (2005: 50-51) has observed that many of the earliest accounts of the media’s role in society looked to it having – for good or ill – society-wide influences, including its use as a propaganda tool for despotic leaderships, its potential for social integration in modern urbanised societies, and its potential to act as a ‘mass educator’, particularly in developing countries. In the mass communication tradition, concepts such as the ‘two-step flow’ as articulated by Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld in the 1940s, and the ‘agenda-setting theory of news’ developed by Maxwell McCombs (2004), are examples of theories that sought to operationalise the concept of media influence. From the standpoint of critical media and cultural studies, the Gramscian concept of cultural hegemony developed by Stuart Hall, David Morley and others attest to the continuing attempts to map the contours of media influence and how they both shape, and are shaped by, the political economy of capitalism (During 2003). In policy debates, the question of media influence hangs over why some media forms are more subject to government regulation than others: as will be discussed below, there has been a longstanding view that broadcasting is a particularly influential medium, by virtue of its capacity to reach all members of society simultaneously, and in a privatised domestic setting characterised by the co-presence of men and women, and adults and children.
The commitment to public service broadcasting, and the licencing of commercial broadcasters, arose in a context where it was believed that mass communications media such as radio and television were particularly likely to be able to influence public opinion, and that there was a social responsibility to direct such influence towards the public good. From a historical perspective, John Thompson has drawn attention to the centrality of communications media to the formation of modern societies, through ‘the social organization of symbolic power’ and the capacity of media as cultural institutions to ‘intervene in the course of events, to influence the actions of others and indeed to create events, by means of the production and transmission of symbolic forms’ (Thompson 1995: 17).

The pioneering media sociology of Jeremy Tunstall focused on questions of media power and influence, whether through media policy, the relationship of media to liberal-democratic societies, media professions and the management of social relations within media institutions, and the changing contours of global media power and influence (Tumber 2005). In the latter case, Tunstall famous proclaimed in 1978 that *The Media Are American*, observing that the influence of U.S. production cultures and values in global media was considerably greater than the apparent reach of U.S. media content, only to question that account 30 years later in *The Media Were American* (Tunstall 2008), where he drew attention to the fast-growing influence of the BRICS nations in the global media environment, and the crisis of credibility of U.S. news agencies in the wake of their reporting of the Iraq War from 2003.2

This paper will consider contemporary questions relating to media influence from three perspectives. First, there is a case study of newspaper reporting of the 2013 Australian Federal election to show how complex it can be to attribute influence to media in terms of
political outcomes, and the continuing relevance of intervening variables in such research. Second, the paper discusses questions that arise in the context of media convergence, and the uncoupling of media content from particular delivery platforms, for differential forms of media regulation that derive from the perceived influence of particular media platforms. Finally, there is a discussion of the question of who is a ‘media company’ in this environment, and some new questions that will need to be asked by policy-makers and researchers about media influence.

**Media Influence or Media Power?**

In this paper, I use the term ‘media influence’ rather than ‘media power’. I observe that the concept of ‘media power’ is used by Thompson, Tunstall, Hall and others as an alternative to the term ‘influence’, that is seen as being aligned to liberal-pluralist political theory (Hall 1982), or to the ‘new revisionism’ in media and communication studies that sees the active audience as effectively resistant to mass media messages (Curran 1995). At the same time, the term ‘media influence’ is preferred as it suggests that the extent to which power exists in relation to media and the social environment remains uncertain, and its effectiveness cannot simply be inferred from its potential existence. For instance, news coverage may influence how voters behave in elections, but cannot determine who wins or loses them. The risk with the term ‘media power’ is that it simply assumed what it needs to prove i.e. that the media have significant society-wide influences. In other words, to the degree that power exists, it exists in terms of the ability to influence outcomes rather than to determine them.
An interesting test case here was the Australian Federal election held in September 2013. The election saw a change of government, with the Liberal-National Party coalition led by Tony Abbott winning office over the Labor Party led by Kevin Rudd, and a notable feature of the election was that, with the exception of one newspaper – the Melbourne Age – all of the Australian print media called for the election of an Abbott government. Of the 11 capital city and national daily newspapers that advocated a Coalition vote, eight are owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, and Murdoch had made it very clear, on Twitter and in public speeches, that he believed a change of government was necessary.

In the case of two of the tabloid newspapers, the Sydney Daily Telegraph and the Courier-Mail in Queensland, this support was particularly vocal. Both papers declared for the Coalition on the first day after the election was announced, whereas most papers carry an Editorial in the last week of the campaign declaring their views, and the Telegraph began its formal coverage with a Monday front page headline, ‘Kick This Mob Out’ alongside a picture of Prime Minister Rudd. Other notable headlines during the campaign included ‘Does This Guy Ever Shut Up?’ (Courier-Mail, about Rudd in an election debate), ‘It’s a Ruddy Mess’ (Melbourne Herald-Sun), ‘Kevin Deadly Sins’ (Sunday Mail), ‘Price of Labor’ (Telegraph), ‘Dead Kev Bounce’ (Courier-Mail) and ‘Australia Needs Tony’ (Sunday Telegraph). Rudd was also represented as ‘Mister Rude’, based on the Mr. Men books, after a complaint from a makeup artist who worked with him, and Rudd and Deputy Prime Minister Anthony Albanese were represented as Colonel Klink and Sergeant Schultz from the 1960s television program ‘Hogan’s Heroes’.
On the question of why News Corporation papers took an anti-Labor position, one factor was opposition to the recommendations of the Finkelstein Inquiry into print media regulation, which proposed replacing the proprietor-funded Australian Press Council with a government-funded statutory regulator, the News Media Council. The Finkelstein Review was various described on its release in February 2012 as ‘Labor’s Plan to Control the Media’, ‘Bringing the Media to Heel’ and ‘A Threat to Free Speech’ (quoted in Flew and Swift 2013). When the Communications Minister, Senator Stephen Conroy, put forward legislation responding to the Finkelstein Review in March 2013, the headline of the *Daily Telegraph* featured Conroy alongside Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, Robert Mugabe and Kim Jong-Un, saying ‘These Tyrants Want to Control the Media … Conroy Joins Them’. Over the page, in case the original message was missed, Conroy’s head was Photoshopped onto Joseph Stalin. The issue of whether Labor’s commitment to a high-speed National Broadband Network posed a threat to the business model of cable television provider FOXTEL, which is 50 per cent owned by News Corporation, may also have been a factor.

So we have the apparent exercise of media power, and motives to do so, but the evidence of whether it influenced the election results is considerably more mixed. The two-party preferred (2PP) swing to the Coalition was 3.65 per cent on the 2010 result, leading to the Coalition winning 17 seats; while this was a significant swing, it was well within the projections of all opinion polls, and was ultimately a lower swing against Labor than many had been expecting. It is also notable that the largest 2PP swings against Labor were in states such as Victoria (5.97 per cent), South Australia (5.54 per cent) and Tasmania (11.27 per cent), where the newspaper coverage was less hostile than in Queensland (where the swing against Labor was 1.31 per cent) and New South Wales (2.82 per cent). In the two parts of Australia where both the number of marginal seats is highest and the *Telegraph* and *Courier-
Mail have their most influence – Western Sydney and Brisbane – swings against Labor were generally smaller than expected, and in some electorates there was an unexpected swing to Labor. It also needs to be remembered that most non-News Corporation publications also favoured a Coalition victory. The Australian Financial Review, for instance, advocated a vote for the Coalition on the day after the election was announced, and The Age, The Economist and The Guardian Australia online site were the only mainstream publications to advocate Labor’s return to office.

In other words, the evidence on whether the News Corporation papers influenced the 2013 Australian Federal election result through their political coverage is unclear. They certainly would not have helped Labor, but they also may not have helped themselves, given that the Australian newspaper market segments along geographical rather than political lines, and they were potentially alienating their not insignificant Labor-voting readerships. There is not a clear correlation between the parts of Australia where the circulation of newspapers with the most hostile coverage were located and overall voting patterns. If The Sun could claim after the Conservatives retained power in the 1992 British General Election that “It was The Sun wot won it”, then this is not a claim that could be confidently made by the Murdoch tabloids in Australia in 2013.

Audiovisual Media Influence: Broadcasting, Subscription Television, and Over-the-Top Services
One of the features of broadcast media regulation throughout the world is that it tends, overall, to be more regulated than print media. Concepts of fairness, universality, social responsibility and the public interest featuring prominently in broadcasting laws around the world. In some broadcasting systems, these are expressed directly through the Charters of public service broadcasters, and in others they are applied more indirectly through the licencing conditions attached to commercially based and privately owned broadcasters (Hoffman-Reim 1996; Feintuck 1999). Among the reasons generally cited for such regulations are:

- To ensure universal availability to the general population of the country of broadcast services;
- To allocate frequencies in an equitable and orderly manner and supervise adherence to rules laid down;
- To ensure a wide range of services and access opportunities according to the needs of society - meaning diversity in social, political, cultural and local/regional terms;
- To promote high quality of content provided as far as possible according to locally decided values and standards, with particular reference to information, education, advertising, culture, taste and decency.

Broadcasting legislation was challenged in the 1980s and 1990s by the question of how to deal with emergent cable and satellite subscription services. In particular, the question arose of what forms of regulation should apply to such services if not the full suite of measures applied to terrestrial broadcasters, and on what bases could the distinction be justified. In administering its responsibilities in relation to broadcasting standards for terrestrial
broadcasters, the UK regulator Ofcom is required under Section 319(4) of the
Communications Act 2003 to give consideration to:

(a) the degree of harm or offence likely to be caused by the inclusion of any particular sort of material in programmes generally, or in programmes of a particular description;

(b) the likely size and composition of the potential audience for programmes included in television and radio services generally, or in television and radio services of a particular description;

(c) the likely expectation of the audience as to the nature of a programme’s content and the extent to which the nature of a programme's content can be brought to the attention of potential members of the audience;

(d) the likelihood of persons who are unaware of the nature of a programme’s content being unintentionally exposed, by their own actions, to that content (Ofcom 2013:71-72).

While provision (a) relates specifically to the content of programs, sections (b) and (c) relate directly to the type of service in question, and section (d) implies that terrestrial broadcasting services are more likely to be the subject of inadvertent exposure to content than those associated with subscription services. On the basis of provisions such as these, more ‘light touch’ regulation of subscription services can be justified on the basis of the services being more specifically ‘media of choice’ than those which are freely available to all viewers, and hence less subject to provisions concerning decency, protection of children, and impartiality in news and current affairs programs.
Similarly, under the Australian *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* a commercial broadcasting service is one that provides programs intended to appeal to the general public, are able to be received by commonly available equipment, are made available free to the general public, and are usually funded by advertising revenue. Under the Australian provisions, it is the payment of a fee for such services rather than the reach of the programs that is the key distinction made, but it is again assumed that cable and satellite services reach fewer viewers than terrestrial broadcasters, and hence require fewer regulations. For example, ‘watershed’ restrictions on the times of the day/evening when certain types of programs (e.g. those containing strong violence) can be shown apply to terrestrial broadcasters but not to subscription broadcasters.

These distinctions have proven to be broadly workable where the equipment required for access to non-traditional broadcast media content was not widely available, and when the number of channels available through terrestrial broadcasting was relatively limited.³ The arrival of digital television complicates this picture somewhat, as it enables the terrestrial broadcasters to develop niche channels which, it can be argued, are not intended to provide content that appeals to ‘mass’ audiences. The larger problem now is that, in an era of near-universal access to the Internet, and to global video content services such as YouTube, Vimeo, Dailymotion, Facebook and myriad other video content sharing services, such distinctions are very hard to sustain. Given that such services are not bound to any single territorial jurisdiction, the question of who could regulate content for such services, even if there was a political will to do so, is highly contentious.
In Australia, issues such as these were considered in the National Classification Scheme Review, undertaken by the Australian Law Reform Commission during 2011, with its Final Report, *Classification—Content Regulation and Convergent Media*, released in February 2012 (ALRC 2012). The general purpose of this Review was to recommend reforms to the legal and regulatory framework for the classification of media content in Australia, in the context of technological convergence, changes in media consumption and community expectations about media content, and the future development of Australian media and digital content industries. In relation to television, two significant questions arose. The first is whether the existence of multiple terrestrial (free-to-air) digital channels points to a need to relax content restrictions on the main broadcasting channels.

In considering this question, some relevant issues are:

- the now quite large audiences such channels attract, accounting for up to 25 per cent of television viewing in Australia;
- the existence of various specialist channels offered by the public broadcasters, including two children’s channels offered by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC);
- the growth of catch-up TV viewing through services such as the ABC’s iView and the BBC’s iPlayer as well as through the Internet;
- the quite different rules that apply to such matters as time-zone restrictions (‘watershed hours’) for programs broadcast on the digital multichannels as compared to the main channels; and
- the availability of parental locking devices on all new televisions sold in Australia.
The Review recommended a gradual relaxation of restrictions applying to the main terrestrial channels in recognition of what are now significantly changing viewer approaches to television in Australia. For example, content specifically aimed at children of different ages on ABC2 and ABC3 would suggest that the rules governing times at which content that is rated other than ‘G’ (General) should be relaxed. Most importantly it was recommended that any new broadcasting legislation should not contain any mandates on when particular types of programs can be shown on television, so that such guidelines are set through industry codes developed in consultation with the public and through negotiation with the Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA). In this way, there is sufficient flexibility to respond to changes in community expectations as well as new technologies while enabling the principles associated with media content classification, such as consumer information and the protection of children, to continue to have relevance and force (ALRC 2012: 192-196).

The issues presented by Internet-based video sharing services are far more complex. At some level, national regulators need to acknowledge that much of the work related to management of such content can only be undertaken by the content service providers themselves, and that the national regulators can draw upon the experience that they have with the content which they can classify – typically feature films, some television programs, and some computer games – to provide guidance to those services themselves about how they may operate within particular countries.

The ALRC review referred to this as *deeming*, whereby content that has been subject to an authorised classification system in another jurisdiction (e.g. computer games classified by the Pan-European Games Initiative or the US-based Entertainment Software Rating Board)
would be deemed to have an equivalent classification in Australia unless there were reasons to consider reclassifying the content. Extending this logic, decisions made by global content service providers such as Google, Apple and Microsoft may be deemed to apply in countries such as Australia subject to the national regulator continuing to have powers to determine the bases on which decisions were being made, in negotiation with the provider (Flew 2012). In more general terms, the ALRC sought to develop a platform-neutral approach to media content regulation, where the focus was on the content itself rather than on its delivery platform (e.g. a feature film is classified, but the same content accessed over the Internet is not), with the content being considered appropriate for classification if it was ‘made and distributed on a commercial basis and has a significant Australian audience’ (ALRC 2012: 125).

Global Content Aggregators and the New Ownership Landscape

A final changing conception of media influence to be considered concerns the implications of media convergence for how we think about ownership concentration and market power. The most commonly used measure of media ownership in media economics is the concentration ratio, which measures what percentage of a market is controlled by the top four or top eight firms in an industry. As a general rule, media industries tend to be oligopolistic, with the top four firms dominating the market. This in turn raises issues about uses of market power, such as prices being unreasonably high, the maintenance of barriers to entry, collusion among industry participants, and the ability to translate this economic power into the exercise of political power in ways that may be at odds with principles concerning the role of media in democratic societies (Gomery 1989; Doyle 2013).
But the two key terms in this equation – industry and market – may be more slippery than they first appear. The cultural economist David Throsby makes the point that:

*Any self-respecting university course or textbook on industry economics spends some time at the outset discussing the difficulties of defining an industry—i.e. whether the concept of industry can be delineated according to groupings of producers, product classifications, factors of production, types of consumers, location etc.* (Throsby 2001: 112).

The broader the terms are being used, the more challenging these questions become. Speaking of the newspaper, radio or television industry is one thing, but does it make sense to aggregate them as the media industries? Indeed, what does it then mean to align these industries with the arts, design, fashion, architecture, computer games etc. and refer to them as the creative industries? Likewise with a market: the UK is often thought of as having a national newspaper market but, as Collins and Cave (2013) note, Scottish newspaper preferences are quite different to those in England, and within England there are strong regional voices, such as *The Yorkshire Post*. These issues play out more strongly in other countries. In Australia, while there are 12 capital city and national daily newspapers, only four of these have any significant readership outside of one city; the rest sit within clearly delineated regional geographical markets.
Media convergence is blurring these lines even further. In his global study of media concentration, Eli Noam (2009, 2013) has argued that what he calls the ‘digital optimists’ are partly right to perceive that the Internet has reduced the degree of media concentration found in the 1980s, but that those of a more pessimistic view are right to perceive an increase in media concentration in recent years, driven by the increasingly global scale of media operations. But the big change in these debates, and the one that existing tools to measure media concentration capture poorly, is that a two-tier media system has been evolving, with large integrator firms operating in oligopolistic market structures being at its core, surrounded by a large number of specialist firms that undertake much of the actual content production (Noam 2009, 436-437).

The second half of the 2010s was a period of crisis for many of the media conglomerates that had dominated the previous decade – companies such as Time-Warner, Disney, News Corporation, Viacom/CBS and Sony – triggering the debate about whether there was a ‘crisis of the media moguls’. But in many of the media markets in which these media giants operate, their challengers were now big ICT and software companies such as Google, Apple and Microsoft: newspapers compete for reader attention with online news portals; TV networks battle with *YouTube* for the attention of screen media consumers; TV programs, music and movies are increasingly downloaded from iTunes or Netflix; and so on. McChesney (2013) has observed that 13 of the 30 largest publicly traded companies in the United States are now Internet-related companies, and the largest Internet-related companies, such as Apple, Google and Microsoft, are now much larger than the largest media companies, such as Disney, and largest than the big telecommunications companies such as AT&T, Verizon and Comcast (McChesney 2013: 130-131).
The big Internet and new media players are coming to play an increasingly important role in traditional media environments. In Canada, to take one example, 34 per cent of the population access IPTV (Internet Protocol TV) services at least monthly in 2013, with 12 per cent of households subscribing to Netflix (CRTC 2013). In the United States, Netflix is expected to double its number of subscribers, from 27 million in 2012 to 54 million by 2020 (Forbes 2013). Cunningham and Silver (2013) have analysed how the ‘new King Kongs’ of online media distribution such as Google, Apple, Amazon and Netflix have become commissioners of original content as well as online distributors, with Netflix’s *House of Cards* series, starring Kevin Spacey, being the most famous example. Holt and Sanson (2014) identify *connected viewing*, or the recombination of television, computing and mobile devices as media viewing platforms as being ‘about more than digital distribution’:

It is the broader ecosystem in which digital distribution is rendered possible and new forms of user engagement take shape. It is as much about the aesthetic and social experience of second screen media as it is about the intermediaries that deliver content to mobile devices and the gatekeepers regulating our Internet access. Connected viewing spans a wide spectrum of industrial practices, from multi-platform modes of production and distribution to the reconfigured promotional strategies and measurement techniques increasingly necessary to gauge marketing success in the digital space (Holt and Sanson 2014: 2).
One way of addressing such conundrums in terms of their policy implications was undertaken by Australia’s Convergence Review Committee. Asked to ‘review the current policy framework for the production and delivery of media content and communications services … [and] develop advice for the government on the appropriate policy framework for a converged environment’ (Convergence Review Committee 2012: 11), the Convergence Review Committee proposed the bold concept of Content Service Enterprises (CSE). In proposed that the focus of regulation shift from being based upon platforms and licences towards a focus upon ‘significant enterprises that produce professional content to Australians’ (Convergence Review Committee 2012, p.10), the Convergence Review defined a CSE as a large media enterprise that:

- Has control over the content that is supplied i.e. it is professionally-produced media content;
- Has a large number of Australians who use or access that content;
- Derives significant revenue from supplying that content to Australians.

The Convergence Review took the view that CSEs should continue to be subject to those forms of media regulation that Australians continued to see as being important, including: public interest tests in relation to changes in ownership and control; classification information about content and access restrictions where appropriate; community expectations concerning fairness, accuracy and transparency in their reporting of news and information; and contributing to the overall level of local content production, in order to contribute to a national culture.
The regulatory radicalism of the CSE proposal failed to get traction in the legislation that subsequently appeared. For the most part, the print, radio, television and Internet industries continue to approach public policy in platform-specific terms, and governments are evaluated on what they may deliver or not deliver to each industry in isolation. It is, however, interesting to note that companies such as Google responded to these recommendations not by outright rejection of regulation, but by instead arguing that they are already significantly contributing to Australian content and culture. In the report titled *Culture Boom: How Digital Media are Invigorating Australia* (Belza et. al. 2012), undertaken by the Boston Consulting Group and commissioned by Google Australia, it was argued that Australian online content creators were already generating a consumer surplus for Australians as well as generating new export opportunities, and that new local content rules for companies such as Google were unnecessary as they were already making a positive contribution to the local media content environment. They were, however, prepared to accept that they are at some level in the media business, even if not in the form of mass broadcast media that dominated the latter part of the 20th century.

**Conclusion**

This paper has sought to critically reflect upon the ways in which the concept of ‘media influence’, which has long been a staple of both media and communications studies and public policy, is relevant in the contemporary convergent media environment through three case studies. The first case of the 2013 Australian Federal election raised the question of whether the partisanship of newspaper coverage continues to have an impact upon election
results. While obviously support from some newspapers helps a political party at some level, and hinders the party it opposes, the evidence from the Australian case suggests that the influence of anti-Labor coverage in the campaign was not ultimately that significant. Any further empirical work on this question would, as the media influence literature has long suggested, need to consider a range of intervening variables, including party leaderships, variations across Australia in overall voting patterns, and the role played by minor parties in the final result, most of whom received little media coverage at all. It should not surprise that intervening variables prove to be important, as this has been a longstanding observation from the media influence literature.

The second case study considered how broadcasting legislation in the United Kingdom and Australia has sought to set differential regulatory requirements for broadcasting and cable services. It was argued that the traditional distinctions, based upon universality of access or whether the service is user-pays, do not hold in an era where over-the-top video streaming services are providing freely available content over universally available devices. The challenge presented by the OTT services is part of the wider uncoupling of media content from specific platforms in an era of media convergence, presenting the challenge of how to devise regulations that relate to media content that can be platform neutral in their application.

Finally, the paper discusses the implications of multi-platform content aggregators with their roots in the ICT and software industries for how we think about key aspects of media policy, such as media ownership and content laws. The definition of ‘media’ that we have been working with in legislation, with its neat divisions between broadcasting and
telecommunications, and its bracketing off of these spheres from convergent communications, is becoming less and less tenable, since it has ever less ability to explain how the world’s largest companies in these businesses – familiar names such as Google, Apple, Microsoft, Amazon and Facebook – now operate. Any future discussion of ‘media influence’ is going to have to go beyond traditional media, and consider the influence of media content aggregators in their various shifting forms.
References


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The term ‘BRICS’ refers to Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Korea. In general, it draws attention to the rising influence of emerging nations, most of which are outside of the OECD, in the global economy. In terms of media, nations such as South Africa, Indonesia, Lebanon, Egypt, Nigeria, Mexico, and the Gulf states also warrant attention in this regard.

The distinction works less well in countries where the percentage of the population who subscribe to cable and satellite services is high. Market penetration rates for Australia (30%) and the United Kingdom (50%) are, for example, considerably lower than the 85-90% penetration rates found in the United States and Canada, and where most consumers experience network and cable television as essentially a part of the same service.