

AMARTYA SEN'S "CAPABILITIES" APPROACH TO THE EVALUATION OF WELFARE: ITS APPLICATION TO COMMUNICATIONS

NICHOLAS
GARNHAM

Abstract

To concern ourselves with the welfare state is to concern ourselves with entitlements. This raises the question, entitlements to what? This essay examines the relevance of the thought of welfare theorist Amartya Sen for the subject of communication theory and policy. Sen's perspective originates from a normative egalitarianism derived from a Kantian emphasis on the position of the other, which he poses in contrast to utilitarian views on welfare. Sen observes that it is possible to make the same set of resources or utilities available to different persons or groups and realise that some are capable of making more effective use of them than others. Applying this "capabilities" approach to communication policy leads to the conclusion that it is not access in a crude sense that is crucial, but the distribution of social resources which make access usable. The point of framing the analysis in this way is that the focus shifts from a mechanistic and crude preoccupation with utilities to enhancing the satisfaction of media users' needs in the realm of communication.

Nicholas Garnham is
Professor at the Centre
for Communication and
Information Studies,
University of Westminster.

To concern ourselves with the Welfare State is to concern ourselves with entitlements. The theory and practice of the welfare state is based upon the assumption that all citizens have entitlements to certain forms of welfare; that the interaction of private individuals pursuing their own interests, particularly their own economic interests, within civil society, will not ensure that all citizens receive these entitlements; and therefore the state has a responsibility for the delivery of such entitlements. Whether these entitlements should be equally distributed among citizens or whether a basic level should be guaranteed is a matter of subsidiary debate.

But the fundamental question remains -- entitlement to what? This is not only of obvious general importance. But whether and if so in what form we can include communications within the remit of the welfare state will depend upon our answer.

It has been the major strength of Amartya Sen's work to focus on this issue. Sen starts from an egalitarian perspective. Thus he phrased the question "Equality of What?", the title of his celebrated 1979 Tanner Lecture.

But before I turn to Sen's argument I think we need to distinguish between types of State intervention and the reasons for them.

Much State intervention in the economy has nothing to do with welfare as I have defined it but is a response to market failure in a narrower sense. Thus in the field of communication we have to distinguish between policies based on the assumption that it is more efficient to produce a good or service via a regulated monopoly from those whose aim and justification is the general provision of what is considered to be an essential service. This issue is raised both in telecommunications under the rubric of universal service and in broadcasting under the rubric of public service. Confusion in this area is exacerbated by the language we use, since market failure arguments may be couched in the language of welfare economics as welfare losses. Thus for instance a flat rate licence fee system for financing broadcasting can be justified either in terms of welfare maximisation because of the zero marginal cost of reaching extra viewers or in terms of the well being to be derived from the wider range and quality of programming and the democratic possibilities to be derived for a common service un beholden to commercial forces. Similarly rate averaging and regulatory prohibitions on cream skimming to ensure maximal network penetration are different from arguments based upon the need of citizens to have a telephone for full participation in social and economic life and therefore, from a welfare perspective, their right to such a phone, however in fact provided.

Sen's approach to the question of defining and measuring welfare, well-being or what his group now calls the quality of life is immeasurably sharpened by starting from a normative egalitarianism. As he puts it,

Every normative theory of social arrangements that has at all stood the test of time seems to demand equality of something . [...] Equal consideration at some level — a level that is seen as important — is a demand that cannot be easily escaped in presenting a political or ethical theory of social arrangements. It is also of considerable pragmatic interest to note that impartiality and equal concern, in some form or other, provide a shared background to all major ethical and political proposals in this field that continue to receive argued support and reasoned defence (Sen 1995, 12, 19).

He goes on to argue that arguments against any form of equality generally take the form of arguing for equality of something else, e.g., liberty as opposed to income. This

leads him to stress the importance of being clear about the Space within which we are arguing for equality. Here we can see some similarity to Walzer's notion of Spheres of Justice. Sen's argument leads him, as we shall see, to argue that policies on distribution and its measurement should focus not on income, or what both Rawls and Dworkin call resources, but on what he calls "The Space of Functionings," defined as the various things a person may value doing (or being). He goes on to argue that one can then focus on either a) realised functionings (what a person is actually able to do) or b) on the set of alternatives she has (her real opportunities). These alternatives or potential choices he dubs "Capabilities." This concept of capabilities derives from the Aristotelian concept of "dunamin" meaning "capability of existing or acting." In the last analysis Sen is advocating the Space of Capabilities as the appropriate space within which egalitarian welfare policies should be designed and evaluated. This may at this point appear very abstract but it leads to radical positively discriminatory conclusions. People differ in their natural endowments, for instance some may suffer from physical disability. Those so disadvantaged may require a significantly higher level of resources or income to produce the same level of capability. In the field of communications it leads to the conclusion that it is not access in a crude sense that is crucial but the distribution of the social resources which make access usable. At a simple level additional support for the blind or deaf, but at a more fundamental level attention to levels of educational inequality which determine the different utilities that can be gained from a given level of supply.

Before returning to these implications of Sen's position within the field of communication let me go through the steps in the argument by which Sen arrived at these conclusions.

Much of Sen's argument may appear very theoretical and abstract, but it is important to stress that he is in the end concerned with pragmatic question of policy assessment and with the measurement necessary for such assessment -- for instance the measurement of poverty or of the relative development levels of different countries. But he stresses that to make appropriate assessments and develop appropriate metrics requires us to decide the value space within which our assessments and measurements will be made.

The capabilities approach derives from a critique of on the one hand welfare economics and the utilitarianism that underlies it and on the other of Rawls' *Theory of Justice* and its concept of primary goods.

Sen criticised the welfare approach on the grounds that, both for hedonistic and preference satisfaction welfarists, they focus "not on the person's capabilities but on his mental reactions." This, he argued, was an unsuitable guide to policy if only because a person may adjust her expectations to her condition.

As he puts it in *Inequality Re-examined*:

The utilitarian notion of value, which is invoked explicitly or by implication in much welfare economics, sees value, ultimately, only in individual utility, which is defined in terms of some mental condition, such as pleasure, happiness, desires [...] there are different problems with different interpretations of utility, but they share the programme of getting the evaluation done indirectly through using some psychological metric like happiness or desire. This is precisely where the main difficulty lies. While being happy may count as an important functioning, it cannot really be taken to be all there is to leading a life (i.e., it can scarcely be the only valuable functioning). [...] The problem is particularly acute in the

context of entrenched inequalities and deprivations. A thoroughly deprived person, leading a very reduced life, might not appear to be badly off in terms of the mental metric of desire and its fulfilment, if the hardship is accepted with non-grumbling resignation. In situations of long standing deprivation, the victims do not go on grieving and lamenting all the time, and very often make great efforts to take pleasure in small mercies and to cut down personal desires to modest — “realistic” — proportions. Indeed, in situations of adversity which victims cannot individually change, prudential reasoning would suggest that the victims should concentrate their desires on those limited things that can possibly be achieved, rather than fruitlessly pining for what is unattainable. The extent of a person’s deprivation, then, may not at all show up in the metric of desire-fulfilment, even though he or she may be quite unable to be adequately nourished, decently clothed, minimally educated, and properly sheltered.

The problem of entrenched deprivation is particularly serious in many cases of inequality. It applies particularly to the differentiation of class, community, caste and gender. While the nature of these deprivations can be brought out more clearly by concentrating on socially generated differences in important capabilities, some of that gain would be wasted if the capabilities themselves were to be assessed, after all, in the metric of utilities (Sen 1995, 54-55).

I would note in passing the overlaps between this approach to deprivation and that found in Bourdieu’s sociology and particularly in the mobilisation of the concept of habitus to analyse the ways in which socially determined expectations are literally incorporated -- that is to say inscribed in our very bodies. An important strand in Sen’s subsequent work has been the analysis of the ways in which deeply entrenched forms of gender discrimination have produced, in situations of measurable absolute and relative deprivation, just this sort of acceptance among many women.

Given this critique it is hardly surprising that Sen was drawn to Rawls’ *Theory of Justice* as an alternative way of thinking about inequality. For Rawls’ theory of justice is built upon a critique of utilitarian theories of distributive justice and a move away from mental states as the appropriate space of evaluation. In particular, Rawls argued that any theory of justice has to confront the problem of opulence. How do we weight, using a purely mental or hedonistic metric, the pleasure gained by the poor person from having just enough to eat with that gained by the rich person from consuming caviar or fine wine. Rawls’ answer was to move from mental states to actual goods, what he called primary goods -- the basic resources necessary for the free pursuit of happiness -- which he argued should be equally distributed. Against this Rawlsian position Sen argued that differently constructed and situated people require different amounts of primary goods to satisfy the same needs. “What people get out of goods depends on a variety of factors, and judging personal advantage just by the size of personal ownership of goods and services can be very misleading. It seems reasonable to move away from a focus on goods as such to what goods do to human beings” (Sen in Nussbaum and Sen 1993). He gives as an example, given an equal bundle of goods, the comparative advantage of a sound limbed person over a paraplegic in the exercise of those freedoms of which it is the aim of Rawls’ theory of justice to ensure equality.

Sen then went on to argue that what we should be concerned with was not mental states or goods but what he called ‘functionings’, which he defined as the various things a person may value doing or being.

The functionings relevant for well-being vary from such elementary ones as escaping morbidity and mortality, being adequately nourished, having mobility etc. to complex ones such as being happy, achieving self respect, taking part in the life of the community, appearing in public without shame. The claim is that the functionings make up a person's being, and the evaluation of a person's well-being has to take the form of an assessment of those constituent elements (Nussbaum and Sen 1993, 37).

It is important for the next step of the argument that Sen makes a distinction between states of well-being on the one hand and on the other agency, or the achievement of states of well-being. This is important for two reasons. First because the enjoyment of valued well-beings may not either have been achieved or indeed be achievable by individual action. He wishes to avoid the Rawlsian stress on the individual pursuit of well-being and the danger of lapsing into a merit as opposed to need based approach to the assessment of equality or entitlement. As he has put it: "A system based on needs would seem to have greater use for the complex idea that we call humanity. Even for the limited application of the merit principle it can be argued that the measure of merit is culture specific. [...] Merit is a bit of an accident not only in its origin, but also in its being treated as merit" (Sen 1997, 105). For instance freedom from malaria may be an extremely highly valued and basic functioning but it cannot usually be said to be the result of the agency of the individual who enjoys it. The second reason however is that he also regards agency as itself a valued functioning. And it is for this reason that he moves from functionings to capabilities as the basic evaluative space. Functionings are what a person does or is. Capabilities are the set of alternative functionings she has (her real opportunities). He does not deny that the measurement of achieved functionings may be important in assessing well-being and indeed be easier to compare than capabilities. But that the distinction is important in both ethics and public policy he illustrates, in a field he has made very much his own the study of famine, by the distinction we make in ordinary language between starvation and fasting. Starvation is an absence of the functioning of nutrition which is not chosen by the agent. He or she does not possess the capability of nutrition. Fasting on the other hand may be a valued state, but it has to be chosen by someone who also has the option to eat. It can thus only be the action of someone whose capability set includes eating as well as not eating as possible functionings. Death and suicide would be another example. This move from achieved functionings to capabilities as the evaluative space for entitlements is particularly important in the context of the critique of welfare as a form of forced consumption, since in the capabilities approach such cases of forced consumption, whether the force derives from market relations or the state, can be seen, in comparison with the achievable relevant capabilities, as a form of deprivation.

Having established that welfare is concerned with the distribution of and entitlement to capabilities and functionings rather than either resources or utilities, we are still left, for the purposes of ethical and policy evaluation, with the problem of hierarchising these functionings and capabilities. As Sen puts it, "there are always elements of real choice regarding the functionings to be included in the list of relevant functionings and important capabilities [...] there is no escape from the problem of evaluation in selecting a class of functionings -- and in the corresponding description of capabilities. [...] It is certainly clear that some types of capabilities broadly conceived are of little interest or importance, and even ones that count have to be weighted

vis-à-vis each other. But these discriminations constitute an integral part of the capability approach" (Sen 1995, 44, 45).

How does Sen approach this problem? He firstly argues that since functionings are robustly heterogeneous the need to weigh them against one another cannot be avoided. But he also argues this is true of other approaches since heterogeneity of factors that influence individual advantage is a pervasive feature of actual evaluation. For instance, an approach based on relative income "simply assumes that there is something homogenous called 'the income' in terms of which everyone's overall advantage can be judged and interpersonally compared [...] this does not resolve the problem — only evades it" (Sen 1997, 204). How then are the weights to be selected. "This is a judgmental exercise and it can be resolved only through reasoned evaluation. In making personal judgements, the selection of the weights will be done by a person in the way she thinks is reasonable. But in arriving at an 'agreed' range for **social evaluation** (e.g., in social studies of poverty), there has to be some kind of a reasoned 'consensus' on weights (even if it is of an informal kind). While the possibility of arriving at a unique set of weights is rather unlikely, that uniqueness is not really necessary to make agreed judgements in many situations, and may not indeed be required even for arriving at a fully complete ordering." For Sen, and here he shares a position similar to Rawls, a very important part of the process of arriving at these comparative weightings is a Kantian move to place oneself in the place of the other. When making comparative evaluations of the functionings and capabilities of others the evaluator needs to place his or herself in the position of the other and ask whether with that capability set they would regard themselves as absolutely deprived and/or relatively disadvantaged. Thus functionings and capabilities are comparatively evaluated and "in a democratic context, values are given a foundation though their relation to informed judgements by the people involved." Thus people living in a given society rank, through a process of reasoned argument, the functionings and capabilities of morbidity vis-à-vis mortality, nutrition vis-à-vis mobility, morbidity vis-à-vis participation in social life, mobility vis-à-vis communication such that they can at least produce partial rankings which, for instance, agree that nutrition is more important (more basic) than communication and morbidity than participation in social life. In the end, he argues, "non-arbitrariness of valuation in a democratic society" depends upon "openness to critical scrutiny, combined with -- explicit or tacit -- public consent". In particular "the metric of market exchange cannot be used to weigh different functionings — any more than different commodities — because it tells us nothing about inter-personal comparisons" (Sen 1997, 206). The use of such a metric is thus precisely a way of avoiding the need for open critical scrutiny of the weightings being used.

This approach to relative weighting has been criticised from a classic liberal perspective on the grounds that, once one accepts, as Sen does, the importance of agency or freedom as an aspect of well-being, the diversity of human goals makes relative weightings in practice impossible and from an Aristotelian perspective, for instance by Martha Nussbaum, that his dilemma can only be avoided by developing "an objective normative account of human functioning."

Sen is clearly torn. On the one hand his move away from the space of utility and resources to that of functionings and capabilities is a move, as he himself admits when pointing to the origin of the concept of capability in Aristotle's notion of *dunamin*,

towards a space of evaluation within which objective assessments of relative advantage suitable as a foundation for egalitarian public policy can be arrived at by reasoned argument. On the other hand he sides with the liberals in seeing freedom itself as a valuable functioning, indeed that which makes capabilities rather than mere functionings the ultimate space of evaluation. His response is that on the one hand the capabilities approach is superior to a commodities or income based approach for the interpersonal and inter social comparisons essential to the justification of entitlements since in actual practice, while commodity requirements may differ as between individuals and societies the underlying capabilities are much less varied and are close to what Aristotle called "non-relative virtues." On the other hand he argues that the first priority is to identify the appropriate space of evaluation -- that one can agree to focus on capabilities while disagreeing both on the exact grounds underlying the determination of relative weights and on the actual relative weights chosen. Even within the agreed value space of capabilities there can be different value purposes, in particular the relative weight given to well-being and agency. (Note this is not the same as the distinction between negative and positive freedom.)

Having hopefully cleared the ground let me now turn back to the question of communication entitlements within a capabilities approach. Sen is fond, if only I suspect to annoy the neo-classics and neo-liberal pro-marketeers, of quoting Adam Smith on necessities:

By necessities I understand not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even the lowest order, to be without (quoted in Sen 1981, 18).

And coupling it with Marx's argument that while "a historical and moral element" enters the concept of subsistence, "nevertheless, in a given country, at a given period, the average quantity of subsistence necessary for the labour is practically known" (quoted in Sen 1981, 18). Sen thus argues that it is possible to arrive at an objective description of such necessary subsistence in a given society at a given time and that such description must be firmly distinguished from any prescriptive statement. A major task for communication scholars, it seems to me, is to provide just such a description in the realm of communications.

Let me now turn to the implications of Sen's capability approach in the field of communication. I imagine that we can all agree that in all modern societies to varying degrees the functioning of social communication is a part of well-being. Certainly it can be reasonably argued that, in developed countries at least, it is indecent, in Smith's sense, for any citizen to be without access to newspapers, broadcasting and the telephone. Sen himself has gone further by arguing in his analysis of famines that the existence of a critical free press is an important independent variable determining the occurrence of famine and thus makes a direct contribution to the functioning of both nutrition and mortality. He has made a similar argument in respect of education and especially the education of women showing in comparing Kerala and China on the one hand with the rest of India on the other that it is the variables of education and other indices of female emancipation that explain variations in life expectancy rather than differences in per capita national income. Kerala, for instance, has life expectancy levels similar to the United States or Western Europe. Thus the existence of the capability that a free press provides may be very basic indeed.

Thinking of entitlements in terms of functionings and capabilities allows us to get behind the superficial indices of access and usage that we so often use. While it remains important for the assessment of comparative advantage or deprivation to have figures on media or telecommunication purchasing and usage patterns, we must always remember that these are very crude indicators and do not get to the heart of the matter. We cannot assume that people derive equal functionings from a given usage or that they are in the position, because of other inhibitors, to take advantage of the full capability set that is in principle on offer. Just as Sen argues that people have different capacities to translate a given food bundle into nutrition and also have different nutritional requirements to reach the same level of functioning, so too in the field of communication it is the real availability of opportunities and the real achievement of functionings that matters. To take a crude example levels of literacy clearly determine to what extent people can use modes of communication based on print — newspapers or a postal service, just as we know that levels of education not only determine what people can get out of their media usage but also what types of media they seek out and use. Crucially for the capabilities approach the evaluation of these differing levels of capability and functioning is something that can in principle be objectively measured and is **not**, for reasons we have examined, a matter of personal preference.

But what the capability approach highlights is that access is not enough. In evaluating levels of entitlement we need to take into account both the range of communication options made available, and these must be real options not mere choices between products and services with minimal real differences, and the ability of people actually to make use of these options, to achieve the relevant functionings. We can have real reasoned disagreements as to what range and type of service can now be regarded as a necessary and about how to equalise the level of achieved functionings. But the first crucial point, from the capability perspective, is that this cannot be justified simply in terms of either the metric of exchange — that is what people actually buy — or the metric of utility — that is what people actually enjoy.

Let me now turn to look at communication policy from this perspective. I will start with the mass media and then turn to telecommunications. We need to think of newspapers and broadcasting as enablers of a range of functionings rather than as a stream of content to be consumed. We can then judge the media and communication policy on the basis of how well or badly they serve these needs and how the relevant capabilities are in fact socially distributed. Thus newspapers and broadcasting contribute to a state of belonging to a given cultural group or society. One is not, in a sense, and feels oneself not to be, a normal citizen if one is unaware of the major stories in the papers and has not had the opportunity to view and listen to a range of commonly viewed and watched radio and TV programmes. These are the currency of daily life. At this level the issue of freely available or subscription clearly arises and the fact that the move of popular sporting events from free over air to subscription, at least in Europe, has raised such widespread public opposition is an index of this functioning.

But the capabilities approach enables us to take a much finer grain approach to the problem and to distinguish between different potential uses of the media and the uses actually made and to ask why potentialities available are not actualised (it is in a sense Uses and Gratifications revisited but without the gratification). Thus the media may contribute to quite distinct functionings. A programme may provide information

on politics and thus contribute to the functioning of political participation. It may provide information on health care and thus contribute to the functioning of health. It may provide information on the job market or on consumer products. It may provide knowledge and experience of cultural practices. It may provide education in both the broad and narrow senses. The point from a capabilities perspective is the assessment of what contribution the medium makes to enhancing its users' range of functionings and thus to their optimal level of being and doing. We might thus from this perspective advocate the public service provision of broadcasting on the grounds that market provision fails to maximise the capability set of broadcasting users.

But this is only, important as that is, to look at the problem from the supply side. We also need to know what the users themselves do with the opportunities presented and to the extent they do not achieve the maximal state of well-being — to the extent that they fail to use the programming to achieve the functioning of informed political participation or improved health care or better choice of job or participation in a wider range of cultural practices, where the barriers lie. These inhibitors may be crudely economic to be addressed by simple economic redistribution, but we also know that other, perhaps more intractable ones, lie deep in the structures of social stratification and within what Bourdieu calls the *habitus*. They clearly and importantly relate to education. But the point from a capability perspective is that if we are serious about entitlement in this field these inhibitors need to be addressed and with positive discrimination. What it does not allow us to do is to use the cop out, common both within the media and elsewhere that the media are the way they are because they are giving people what they want.

Let us turn now to look at telecommunications from this perspective. Welfare entitlement in telecommunications has been traditionally expressed in terms of universal service. Let us leave to one side the fact that most of the claims made historically for universal service are mythic. How does the capabilities approach change our view of what universal service might entail. What should the relevant entitlements be? At present, they are defined largely in terms of crude access, i.e., dial tone supplemented increasingly by various life line and low tariff services. We need to think of entitlements to telephony in terms of a range of functionings. There is for instance the being in a state of contactability. We can argue, I think, from the Smithian perspective of what produces social shame, that in developed societies at least, the ability to say ring me or I'll ring you without thinking about it has become the social norm and that those without that potential functioning are disadvantaged. But the absence of this ability also affects other important functionings. It is an inhibitor of the maintenance of familial and wider social networks and thus of full participation in the social life of the community. It may also be a powerful barrier to full participation in the labour market. From this perspective those who have access to telephony through public call boxes, life line service etc. are clearly disadvantaged. The existing established functionings of telephony are not being made universally available or to put it another way the telephonic capabilities of this proportion of the population are severely restricted and this will in turn contribute to narrowing the capability set across a wider range of possible functionings — employment, participation in cultural events, dealing with public bureaucracies, access to health care etc. As in the associated area of transport its lack or limits clearly narrows the range of options for movement through social space.

This approach then raises the question of when new options should be added to the capability set as a matter of entitlement. For instance, while I personally hate the mobile phone, we have to recognise that mobility widens the capability set and is a functioning that is increasingly widely available. Are those without it now sufficiently disadvantaged to make it an entitlement? Similar questions are already being raised in relation to Internet connections, usage of the World Wide Web, etc.

I do not pretend that these are easy questions. But what the capability approach argues is the need to develop and agree more fine grained measures and indices that reflect what people in practice can or cannot do with these services, the benefits they do or do not derive from them, rather than measuring mere access or expenditure. We can then devise distributional policies to establish, depending on our chosen value scheme, either a common base level or equality of capability.

Let me then conclude by summing up the argument. The welfare state is concerned with entitlements. This then raises the question entitlements to what? In answering this question Sen developed the capabilities approach. This rejects both utilities and resources as the appropriate space for the evaluation of entitlement and shifts to functionings, which measures well-being in terms of being and doing, and to capabilities, defined as the range of options of being and doing a person has available. The rejection of utility as the appropriate measure of well-being and the advocacy of a needs based rather than either desire or merit based approach to entitlement means that in principle capabilities and functionings can be objectively evaluated and comparatively through a process of rational, public debate based upon the Kantian shift to the position of the other. It moves away both from a post-modern relativism of value and the view of the consumer as free at the point of consumption and from the neo-classical, welfarist view of the free market as producing the maximisation of individual utility towards a more Aristotelian view of objective value based upon basic human functions and therefore needs. In evaluating the performance of the media and telecommunications and of communications policy from a welfare perspective the capabilities approach moves us away from the metrics of both money and pleasure towards the ways of being and doing enabled by communication and towards an analysis of the barriers that stand in the way of people actualising the social potential communication both does and could make available. It also leads to policies of positive discrimination in the face of these barriers if we are serious about equality.

References:

- Nussbaum, Martha and Amartya Sen, eds. 1993. *The Quality of Life*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Rawls, John. 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Sen, Amartya. 1981. *Poverty and Famines*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Sen, Amartya. 1982. Equality of What (1979 Tanner Lecture at Stanford). In A. Sen, *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sen, Amartya. 1995. *Inequality Reexamined*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Sen, Amartya. 1997. *On Economic Inequality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Walzer, Michael. 1983. *Spheres of Justice*. New York: Basic Books.