Sample Reading Reflection Answers

Below is a sample submission of a set of answers to the items in my reading reflection. It is for a chapter that you have not read. But in some ways this is good. Because as you read the responses you can clearly see that the user read the chapter and was making connections. The writing is clear and shows reflection. Notice that not all of the answers are that long, but they show thought.

1. What are the main points of this reading (focus on concepts, ideas, and theme, not on individual facts)?

   In Chapter 8 of Blown to Bits (“Bits in the Air: Old Metaphors, New Technologies, and Free Speech”), the authors discuss regulations on radio and wireless technologies, where these regulations include both technological regulations and content regulations. The authors describe how radio technologies evolved, from the late 1800’s to today, with an important part of this development happening between 1910 and 1930. In those days, radio technology was just being invented, and the airwaves were somewhat chaotic without regulation. At first, regulation was introduced to allocate parts of the radio spectrum for technical reasons — to avoid interference. Not long after that, regulations on content emerged, with the argument that 1st Amendment free speech rights didn’t have free reign in such a limited resource (limited because, at the time, technology didn’t make efficient use of airwaves and available frequencies). Because of the scarcity of the resource, licenses to use it were reserved for broadcasters that worked “in the public interest.” This is the historical background for current content regulations against profanity, nudity, etc. Putting these regulations in this historical context is interesting, but unlike the rest of the book, this chapter went beyond discussion of facts and historical context into some pretty blatant advocacy for a particular position: removing almost all regulations on wireless/radio use.

2. Was anything unclear or confusing to you?

   The authors do effectively make the case that the original arguments about resource scarcity no longer apply in light of today’s better technology, but it is a logical leap to go from there to saying that the only sensible approach now is to remove all the regulation. While there are certainly some good arguments for less regulation, the authors didn’t make a very good case. I don’t think the author’s made a convincing argument that the solution is doing away with regulation. Did I miss how they connected these pieces?

3. What was new to you, and did it change the way you think about or perceive things?

   The historical context was interesting, and I hadn’t been aware of how chaos in radio development led to the FCC and associated regulations. The discussion of how technology has advanced while policy and regulation have not — resulting in regulations relevant for 80 year-old technology but not so relevant to today — made me think about what would be sensible from a policy standpoint with today’s technology. The book pushed one particular view of what would be sensible, but it’s worth thinking about other approaches.
4. Was there anything you would like to explore further or find out more about?

Smart technologies for radio sound interesting, such as software-defined radios and cognitive radios. It would be interesting to compare how much capacity was available with 1930’s technology (when “scarcity” arguments led to regulation) versus what could be done with today’s technology. Is it 10 times greater today? 1000 times greater? It would be interesting if this could be quantified.

5. Describe at least one connection between the reading and topics from outside class (other classes, news stories you’ve seen, etc.)?

Janet Jackson’s “wardrobe malfunction” at the 2004 Super Bowl caused a big controversy, resulting in a fine of over half a million dollars being levied against CBS by the FCC. This is exactly the kind of content regulation that is discussed in this chapter, and is based on decades old arguments that no longer make sense. The technological advancements that make better and better use of airwaves is also apparent from the way smartphone speed keeps increasing (from 1x to 3G to 4G and 4G/LTE). It’s difficult to see how scarcity of the resource can be a problem when current technology can deliver multiple megabits per second to thousands of cell phones simultaneously.

6. Give at least one specific example of an aspect or experience in your personal life that is related to the reading.

The chapter lists quite a few recent innovative uses of wireless transmission, including WiFi, car lock/unlock remotes, Bluetooth, cell phones, wireless handsets for home phones, and wireless game controllers. I have used all of these technologies, so my life has clearly been affected by innovation in wireless devices. The role of regulation in limiting further wireless innovation is important to the technologies that might be part of my life in the future.

Credit:

Responses stolen almost word for word from a document produced by Stephen Tate at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.