

2012 may bring a reversal by the government on the deregulation of the UK's media

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At the close of 2011, British Politics and Policy at LSE asked our contributors for their thoughts and predictions for 2012. Looking ahead, [Sally Broughton Micova](#) finds that while traditionally Conservative governments are in favour of liberalisation and deregulation, the extraordinary events of 2011 such as the phone hacking scandal, mean that government will continue to be under pressure to increase the level of media regulation.



One would usually associate a Tory-led government with market liberalisation, de-regulation and less government intervention, but 2012 may end up looking rather the opposite in the media sector. It will be a busy year for media policy, but after the events of 2011: the phone hacking scandal, the BskyB bid withdrawal, and the [Leveson Inquiry](#), it is likely that the agenda will be one of re-regulation and increasing oversight or even intervention.

The year is set to start out with a [Communications Review](#) Green Paper, due to be published by DCMS later this month. When the consultation was launched in May 2011, I believe most of us would have predicted more de-regulation of communications markets and perhaps further cuts to Ofcom. But things have changed. [Speaking at LSE in November](#), Chairman of the Commons Culture Media and Sport Committee John Whittingdale predicted that the Green Paper will reflect a reversal of the trend of de-regulation seen in the last several bills related to this sector.

In [his September address](#) to the Royal Television Society, Culture Minister Jeremy Hunt suggested regulating media plurality should be similar to other industries in which the Office of Fair Trading has the power to take action ad hoc. He argued that some institution should be able to call for an inquiry whenever a media owner seemed to get too big, and not only when mergers or buy-ups are taking place. He also warned that unless the newspaper industry manages to come up with more robust mechanism than the Press Complaints Commission, they may find themselves being “backdoor-regulated” by Ofcom because of increasing convergence and their presence as content on other platforms. So despite the continued focus on growth, it appears that the Green Paper may move the Communications Review in the direction of stronger regulation both in terms of plurality and standards.

On the issue of press standards we are likely to see a year of soul searching by journalists, politicians and the public. As we attempt to re-(self)regulate the UK media, there are several questions to answer and lines to be drawn, such as on the limits of acceptable behaviour in the public interest and what actually is the public interest.

The Leveson Inquiry has opened up many of these questions, but parliament will be taking a stance on one of the big ones long before Leveson makes its first report. The [Joint Select Committee](#) on Privacy and Injunctions is due to report at the end of February. This will be an opportunity for parliamentarians from various parties to come to some consensus on where the line between private and public interest should be drawn for journalists in the future. A strong position from parliament on the issue of privacy will have to taken into account by the Leveson process and could contribute constructively to further discussions of press standards, self-regulation and the public interest.

It has been [pointed out](#) that we can expect cries for press freedom eventually from the newspapers and other media. However based on the statements of some editors, even [Paul Dacre](#), in recent months, I believe such cries will be softened by some willingness to accept more stringent enforcement of standards and media plurality. I only hope that the backtrack from deregulation doesn't go too far.