

Steven Barnett: UK Needs Creative Solutions & New Policy Framework for Media Plurality

Speaking for the annual Charles Wheeler Lecture on Journalism at Westminster University, Shadow Culture Minister Harriet Harman called for a cross-party process for new regulation on media plurality. Professor of Communications **Steven Barnett**, who has advised various parliamentary, governmental and European bodies on media issues, hosted the event. LSE Media Policy Project's **Sally Broughton Micova** asked him about his views on some of the solutions Harman proposed and discussed his new project on media plurality and expectations for future policy in this area.



Q: I understand that you recently received funding for a major research project into media pluralism. Can you tell us a bit about the project and what you intend for it to add to debates about media plurality?

Steven Barnett: The core purpose of this project – which is being funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council – is to exploit the wealth of evidence from module 3 at the Leveson Inquiry and to facilitate debate with policy makers, academics, industry executives and independent experts on new approaches (or new variations on old approaches) to tackling plurality issues. I'm convinced that, for both political and technological reasons, this is a uniquely opportune moment for real political action on an issue from which politicians have historically run headlong in the opposite direction.

It is not simply about addressing an outdated plurality regime from the 2003 Communications Act which is manifestly not fit for purpose (and was anyway passed as a political fix in response to a very effective cross-party lobby led by Lord Puttnam). Nor is it simply about addressing a concentration of media power which virtually all political witnesses at Leveson agreed was contrary to the public interest.

It is also about thinking through creative solutions for a new policy framework which would both incorporate robust public interest criteria and generate new and workable ideas for different organisational approaches to journalism. Too often, this debate has been couched in terms of “how do we stop X” (where X is invariably Rupert Murdoch). I believe that this is an opportunity both to find workable and politically acceptable remedies for unacceptable concentrations of media power, but at the same time address the parlous financial state of good – and especially good local – journalism.

Q: In **her speech** yesterday Shadow Culture Minister Harriet Harman made a strong push for action on media plurality talking specifically about caps on media ownership and market share limits that should be considered not just in merger situations but also when they organically occur in the market. To what extent can structural solutions such as these “ensure no media owner can exert such a damaging influence on public opinion and policy makers” as she suggested?

I don't think there is much argument that structural approaches should be part of the solution, and that they should – as Leveson himself made clear – go well beyond those that might be appropriate under pure competition law. If you look at what economists would call the counterfactual – what conditions might prevail, absent any appropriate structural remedy – the prospect of the same individual commanding, say, over half of all



newspaper/online readership or the vast majority of TV news viewership is clearly untenable.

But establishing the principle barely gets us started, because it begs the question of what the criteria should be (revenue or share, consumption or availability?), what the thresholds should be, who should decide, and under what circumstances. I have made it clear in my submissions to Leveson, to Ofcom and to both parliamentary select committees that organic growth can pose as big a threat as merger/acquisition activity; and that therefore Ofcom requires some mechanism, such as a regular review or discretion to launch an investigation, to cope with market evolution. As the first House of Lords committee report on media ownership recommended, it should not be solely at the discretion of the Secretary of State – an interested and potentially compromised party – to launch such an enquiry.

Q: You have in the past pointed out that media pluralism should be looked at not just in terms of news provision, but in a wider cultural context and in relation to other media functions. What do you see as plurality concerns in terms of this context?

I have always found it strange that in terms of setting news agendas, influencing opinions or shaping the national conversation, there has been almost exclusive emphasis on news and current affairs. I understand the logistical complexities in broadening the scope, but in conceptual terms it is surely unarguable that drama, comedy, soaps and documentaries are potent and significant cultural contributors. Think of the impact of Jon Stewart's daily programme in the US, of HIGNFY (Have I Got News For You) over here, of dramas like Homeland, of the way in which major issues such as drugs, policing, education and health are framed by television programmes.

William Shawcross, in his book on Murdoch, describes how the Fox Network injected a higher level of violent and intrusive content into television that had previously been acceptable on American TV through programmes such as *A Current Affair* and *America's Most Wanted*. You do not have to make a normative judgement on such content to reach the conclusion that Murdoch's ownership of a TV network impacted on the American cultural environment beyond news and current affairs.

Q: On 18 June you are due to testify in front of the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications as part of **their inquiry** into media plurality. What do you hope to see as a result of this inquiry?

This inquiry represents a huge opportunity to kick-start the policy process. It's a committee I know well, having acted as specialist adviser several times over the last 5 years, and they always address these issues from a non-partisan, non-dogmatic and public interest perspective. It means that their reports are taken very seriously, and I hope they are prepared in particular to cast a critical eye on the "consolidation as universal panacea" arguments that we tend to hear from the big industry players and their umbrella groups. Most importantly, I hope they will add their own influential voice to a call for cross-party action to promote the public interest at a critical moment when – with less than two years until the next election – all political parties will be growing very nervous about tackling concentrations of media power. Whatever they might have said on Leveson's witness stand, the prospect of power tends to dim political appetite for genuine policy change in this area.

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