

The costs of the UK's 'wolf pack' media system

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As Ed Miliband builds his new Labour front bench team without his talented and experienced older brother, [Bart Cammaerts](#) wonders if David Miliband's purdah is just the latest cost of the UK's strong, national media system and its personality-driven coverage of political life.



Like poker, politics is a game with some extremely tough breaks – cases where a tiny difference in outcomes changes lives for ever. One of the Miliband brothers was always going to lose the great prize of Labour's leadership, and to have to fall back to lesser roles. But David Miliband's decision to retreat to the backbenches seems to be driven by far more than that – principally the extreme media scrutiny to which UK politicians must submit. By resigning to the back-benches, he would avoid the '[constant soap operatic blah](#)', according to Alistair Campbell.

Tony Blair famously spoke of the UK media as a 'feral beast'. Yet is it really so exceptional? All Western societies and beyond are immersed in an hyper-saturated media ecology characterised by a multiplicity of channels and a high demand for content, from the substantive to the trivial. So what is so different about the UK?

One of the most distinct features of the current UK media landscape is the sheer volume and resilience of the newspaper sector asserting its dominance by setting the agenda, manufacturing opinion and directing moral outrage. Hence, the shock of many newspaper editors after the first television debates when they seemed to have lost their ability to command public opinion to television and the internet. The right-wing press's later attempt to reassert their dominance by viciously trashing Nick Clegg, was partially successful – the Liberal Democrats eventually fared poorly in terms of votes compared predicted by the post-debate polls. But neither did the Tories get their much hoped for overall majority.



Image credit: DECC

There has been a worldwide decline in the sales of newspapers, which was particularly dramatic in the UK – a 21 per cent drop from 2007 to 2009. Yet the newspaper format for getting news and views remains highly popular in this country. In January 2010 about 9.5 million copies of national newspapers were sold. In addition to this the regional newspapers contribute another 0.2 million copies on average and London's free *Evening Standard* now has a print-run of about 600,000. This means that the UK boasts one newspaper copy sold per every 5 inhabitants more or less. Compared to Belgium's 1/14 or France's 1/9, this is pretty good going.

Another peculiarity of the UK print media culture is its partisan – mainly rightwing – nature. In most democratic countries the traditional partisan newspaper sector gradually depoliticised and became more independent, more critical of their old paymasters, floating politically, just as their readership. Ownership structures in Europe also sometimes reflect this, for example a media group owning a progressive paper as well as a traditionally more conservative paper, and even developing some synergies between them. This exposes the difference between running a newspaper as a business and owning a title (or titles) for political aims and goals. It is the latter motive that is often more important in the UK than the former. In the UK most of the newspapers position themselves on the political scale from rightwing to very rightwing, with many of them being populist, scandal hungry and deeply ideological in how they frame and select the news they produce. The ownership structures and political intentions of the owners of newspapers are crucial in this regard.

However, there is some diversity, with *The Guardian*, *Independent* and *Daily Mirror* taking somewhat different stances.

In some way it is strange that we hold impartiality and balance as such important values when it comes to broadcast journalism, hence the sheer disbelief and horror of European observers in relation to someone like Glenn Beck, of Fox TV in the United States. But at the same time the very partisan and often one-sided nature of the reporting by most of the newspapers is seldom challenged. This is of course a highly sensitive issue and most people recognize that not all the media need to be impartial and balanced all of the time. But while complete objectivity is a myth, clearly the regulation of ownership structures remains important for a diverse media landscape representing different opinions and voices, although they have and are being loosened ever more. At the same time, the mental stance of journalists also need to change, certainly in view of the ongoing News of the World bugging-scandal. Ultimately the editorial independence of journalists versus media owners needs to be better protected as well.

However, despite all this, the relationship between politics and media will always be fraught, but also complicit and symbiotic. Personal privacy, and the luxury of making a mistake or an error of judgement, have become non-existent for most politicians. And the media and public's scrutiny at times reaches levels whereby the trivial is all too often promoted to the status of the substantive. Yet politicians, like celebrities, are nevertheless dependent on the media. They crave media attention, they create events specifically for them and they attempt to micro-manage their public persona and image, which might conflict with their backstage behaviour. For most of us who live outside that synoptic media bubble, it is not really conceivable what it might be like to be the object of permanent surveillance from the many.

'Ed needs a clean field', David proclaimed, but the harsh reality remains that when one of the protagonists leaves the scene as he has (for a time), the soap is not over. Tomorrow a new episode starts. Furthermore, politics is never a clean field and the reporting of it won't be either, certainly not in the UK.

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