

Media Pluralism: How Rawls can help us think about Newscorp's BskyB bid (guest blog)

One of the things that has intrigued me about the argument over the Newscorp/BSkyB bid has been the range of responses from the legalistic to the emotional. In the end Jeremy Hunt will have to show that he has acted on rational grounds. It is a political decision, but it must be based on rationality. Otherwise, some highly-paid lawyers are going to make his life (or his civil servants' lives) a misery.

So can you make an objective decision? What would be the grounds in principle? In this guest blog LSE Media PhD candidate Max Hanska-Ahy attempts to use the philosophy of John Rawls to tackle the problem from an ethical, not pragmatic or personal perspective.

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By Max Hanska-Ahy

The UK is currently awash with [debates](#) on whether [Newscorp's BskyB bid](#) should be allowed to go through. Arguments framing the question as one of consumer choice go up against those framing it as a matter of citizen interests. While those arguments recounting Newscorp's vices go up against those listing its virtues.

As the cases are made it becomes clear that they depend to a large extent on what we think about Newscorp. How we define pluralism and frame our arguments too often depends on whether we believe the outcome will favour our own views and interests—we tend to select evidence that confirms our views (what is called confirmation bias). That is why starting out with questions about consumer choice, citizen interests or Mr Murdoch's perceived merits will not yield a satisfactory answer.

Fair And Just?

The answer will not satisfy because the focus of these arguments misses an important point. We value media pluralism first and foremost because we believe it to be a prerequisite for political democracy – that it is important to a fair and just society.

That is why a good argument about pluralism cannot start out from an underlying position on the kinds of choices that should be available to us, the kinds of interests we have or the kind of case currently under discussion. Pegging arguments to such particularisms is to place the carriage before the horse, or rather our judgements before the principle.

Veil Of Ignorance

An impartial rule can offer an alternative way of approaching the case at hand. The 'veil of ignorance,' a thought experiment employed by the political philosopher John Rawls, can help us to conceive such a rule. We should imagine a situation in which we know nothing about the prevailing media landscape, our own political preferences or social status, a situation in which we do not know whether a proposed increase in media concentration would strengthen or weaken the representation of the views and interests we share.

Under such conditions we could devise following principle: "an increased concentration in media ownership is permitted only if it will benefit the representation of the most marginalised voices in society and hence can be seen to increase the pluralism of information and perspectives available in the media."^{*}

Following Rawls, we can argue that it would be rational for us to adopt such a rule because in ignorance of what the consequences of greater concentration might be for our own standing, we would choose to maximise the benefits of those least represented, lest we be them.

A Plug For Rawls

Rawls' thought experiment does not offer a solution to a problem, but it does offer an alternative way of viewing the on-going debate that does not depend on our particular interests or views about Newscorp, and which does not require us to set more or less arbitrary limits to the concentration of media ownership.

* Note that this rule is derivative of Rawls' difference principle.

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