

# Should Hunt take Ofcom's advice and refer the BSkyB bid? (guest blog)

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/02/04/should-hunt-take-ofcoms-advice-and-refer-the-bskyb-bid-guest-blog/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/02/04/should-hunt-take-ofcoms-advice-and-refer-the-bskyb-bid-guest-blog/)

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City University's journalism school held one of their excellent half-day 'speed-dating' conferences on media plurality in the light of the NewsCorp/BSkyB merger issue. We had [our own session](#) just before Christmas. I couldn't make it, but my colleague Dr Damian Tambini went – here's his report.



Ofcom's analysis of the implications for plurality of the proposed merger between News International and BSkyB met a mixed reception at this gathering of experts. Many of them were of the view that the evidence is of limited use because the decision will be – rightly in their view – ultimately a political decision, which should be made by accountable politicians rather than regulators.

This is broadly true, but should be qualified on a couple of grounds. First, the evidence matters because the politicians can be held to account in the courts if they do not have proper regard to the evidence.

Second, there are reasons that we have to have a clear research and evidential basis to politicians' decisions on the media: because politicians more than anyone rely on the reputation control that news media provide. This is why the legislative framework in the

form of the Communications Act 2003 in some ways insulates politicians from the process – if only by ensuring that the advice they receive from regulators is fully available to the public.

So if the evidence does matter, what did the experts gathered at City University make of it? Broadly they were unable to punch any holes in it.

Ofcom have not developed an overarching plurality index, but they have identified a series of useful proxies. David Elstein and others did raise some questions about what relative weight newspaper consumption should be given. Apparently if you vary this value this has significant impact for one of the Ofcom indices. This is true, but it was argued by Steve Barnett and others that newspaper consumption is much more focused and consequential than TV viewing, which undermines Elstein's position.

But broadly the view of the room as a whole was that the Ofcom figures did justify their advice to refer the merger to the Competition Commission for an Inquiry.

By Dr Damian Tambini

POLIS has compiled a [dossier of background documents](#) on this issue.

I have blogged about it [here](#)

An LSE PhD student has taken another, philosophical perspective [here](#)

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