

The New Fourth Estate: a response to Alan Rusbridger

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2010-10-13

Is this a media Magna Carta moment? In a stimulating 'Beta stage' [essay](#) Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger has suggested that British Journalism – the Fourth Estate – is now made up of three divisions. But what is really interesting is not the fact of this media constitutional shift, but its consequences.

Rusbridger [claims](#) that the Internet and its associated processes have changed the balance of power within the media itself:

“There is the press, mostly still privately owned and lightly regulated, which was all we had until the dawn of broadcasting. Then there are public service broadcasters – publicly owned and, in return, pretty stringently regulated in terms of content, balance, impartiality and so on. Finally, there is the new public sphere opened up by digital technologies”

In his [survey](#) of this new media world he highlights some tough policy issues in each of these sub-divisions of the Fourth Estate.

Press Crisis

For the press the key question is whether the current regulatory limits on ownership should be revised in the light of the business model crisis? Should convergence between print and online be matched with the removal of barriers between local and national as well as between sectors? As I argued in [SuperMedia](#), consolidation is a traditional business response to declining profitability and external market threats, but it's not a very creative or particularly sustainable long-term solution.



The boring compromise answer is that regulatory powers should be maintained but relaxed. As long as Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) and digital sustains plurality then the press should be allowed to reconfigure geographically. I also think that it is logical to allow cross sector ownership. So let national newspapers own local radio, for example.

So I also have no objection to the intriguing prospect Rusbridger raises of a merger between the Guardian and Channel 4 News. A match made not in heaven perhaps, but certainly in liberal north London. It is ludicrous that both organizations have hundreds of staff duplicating very similar journalism albeit on different platforms. The creative synergy would be fascinating although I think it would be a mistake to assume that bringing together the three platforms and two organizations in one place would eliminate the costs and problems of either. The expensive loss-making infrastructure of printing presses and TV studios would still be there. [\[i\]](#)

The regulatory question would be whether these mergers across platforms would reduce competition in the media markets overall. Well, yes, obviously they would, but the question is one of degree. Arguably, convergence expands the size of the media market that any company is in, so decreasing the overall impact of any consolidation. So let it happen. A bit.

BBC Redux

Paradoxically perhaps, I think that this kind of regulatory relaxation helps make the case for not reducing the BBC's range of services as much as people like Rupert Murdoch (and secretly, surely, even Alan Rusbridger) might want.

If you are going to allow the press, independent broadcasting and online to coalesce, then it is even more important to have the BBC as a guarantor of public service values. We live in an age when data is critical to our individual and collective wellbeing. So it could be argued that easy access to impartial, accurate and comprehensive topical information is a basic human right or at least an essential public service. It should not just be seen as a response to market failure. It is a vital social good in an advanced, liberal, free-market society.

The BBC need not be a monolithic supplier of this service. Indeed, I have long argued that it has to be forced to go much further in acting as a partner, commissioner and supporter of public service media provision by other organizations. The licence fee can no longer be just for the BBC. In this way the size question that Rusbridger raises changes into a function question.

The public space that the BBC represents must not be seen as a kind of National Park for 'good' journalism where the only policy choice is to encroach or extend. This 'Green Belt' version of the BBC belongs to the pre-digital age. In a post-industrial media age the BBC should become a creative industries service not only a centre of production.

The Digital Dimension

Of course, all this is assumed to be happening in a digital context. And in that sense I think Rusbridger's schema works less well by consigning Online to a distinctive third sector. The logical extension of my argument about [Networked Journalism](#) (and what [Rusbridger calls 'Mutualised Journalism'](#)) is that you can't treat 'social media' as discreet from the production and distribution of news on other platforms and I suspect that goes for other forms of media production, too.

Yes, there are vast swathes of media space where the world is reported and commented on in diverse ways by people who don't call themselves journalists. But as Rupert Murdoch has shown, the mainstream media can own some of that space. And all of it is potentially connected by the Internet to the process of news production in the newsrooms that inhabit the other two divisions of the Fourth Estate.

It seems to me that ultimately, digital does dissolve the distinctions. Most people at any given time are working on distinct platforms but the flows of consumption and communication are multi-dimensional and integrated.

Questions Questions

Which brings me to the last of Alan Rusbridger's questions about the nature of those social media mechanisms and networks. Are they weak communities and do they contribute little in the way of original information?

The full answer to those questions is too long for this piece. But in short, a huge NO. It's not that social media is weaker or less creative – it is different. We are comparing apples and oranges here, but both are fruit.

I think regulation can help preserve the vitality of those three sectors and get us through what Rusbridger call the 'digital whirlwind'. Just because the changes in media are profound does not mean that we have to abandon our values. As countries like Iran and China have shown, the Internet is controllable.

The real question is why you would want to restrict the most powerful force for expression and connectivity the world has ever seen. In practice the UK is better placed than many states to benefit in this new media landscape thanks to happy facts of history, intellectual capital and language. I hope that through a classic British synthesis we will facilitate a new settlement where the Fourth Estate in its new formation is allowed to prosper and provide the media we need.

[i] Declaration of interest: I used to work for Channel 4 News and retain links with both that newsroom and The Guardian

