

Hunt Bold

Culture Minister Jeremy Hunt's much trailed **speech** to the Royal Television Society lived up to it's recurring theme of Boldness. It was the most wide ranging and ambitious ministerial speech I can remember. But can the Communications Bill live up to the expectations raised by this speech?

On media plurality, Hunt has asked Ofcom "to examine what the options are for measuring media plurality across platforms and recommend the best approach" He also asked them to "look at whether or not it is practical or advisable to set absolute limits on news market share; whether they believe a framework for measuring levels of plurality could or should include websites and if so which ones; and whether or how it should include the BBC." There is a big, and perhaps mistaken assumption in this request: namely that it is possible to measure plurality in this way. International experience, notably in the **US** suggests that it might not be. It may be that this request – for more research from Ofcom which should be submitted to the Leveson Inquiry – will in fact intentionally or not kick the problem into the long grass, and as far away from DCMS as possible. The central and very touchy area Ofcom will be asked to report on is whether the calculations should include the BBC. The problem is compounded by the fact that in the UK, legislation relating to media plurality defines the objective of media plurality extremely broadly. It is extremely difficult to find a metric for measuring media plurality that finds a way of relating 'internal plurality' – guarantees of impartiality and fair representation to which some providers such as the BBC are subject, to 'external plurality' – the structure of ownership of news providers as it impacts individual citizens. Some kind of judgement by a regulator or a minister is always necessary. Whilst Hunt might want rid of the problem, the public may at least want the reassurance that those deciding on huge media mergers can be voted out, so an Ofcom decision may not be the answer.

A lot of the speech is 'steady as she goes.' No change on broadband policy – but some acknowledgement that duct access is not delivering quickly enough and pressure needs to be put on BT to reduce the prices charged to companies that want to lay fibre on the BT pole and duct network. Support – but not confirmation – for Hargreaves' idea for a Digital Copyright Exchange. And confirmation of the government position supporting reform of press self regulation as the main response to phone hacking.

Buried in the speech however there is some fascinating material on regulatory convergence. No commitments or announcements, but some fundamental questions raised about the role of recently-criticised self regulatory bodies such as ATVOD, the PCC and their relationship to OFCOM.

Hunt attempts to bash heads together as follows: "my challenge to you is this: work with us to establish a credible, independent regulatory framework which has the confidence of consumers and we will support it as the one-stop regulatory framework to be applied across all the technology platforms you operate." The problem with this is that there appear to be few incentives for these private bodies, and the companies that fund them to collaborate with one another. What Hunt is offering – or threatening – to make them collaborate is not clear. Perhaps he is offering to keep Ofcom off their turf.

Hunt made clear that despite **Sally's efforts** he is going to steam ahead with Local TV. One wonders if it was wise to acknowledge in this speech that he is entirely aware that he is being warned that the scheme is not viable. This could backfire in the future if he is forced to revise the policy, or if audiences are weak.

Hunt will have been aware that in the wake of phone hacking scandals expectations were high – hence the 'boldness' riff. Some of this speech gets it just right – setting out an ambitious and necessary programme of reforms. But the real challenges come next. In an Olympic year, an

understaffed Department for Culture Media and Sport, and a non-policymaking Ofcom, have a huge amount to do.

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