

Power To The People: Murdoch Jnr on public service broadcasting

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The public service broadcasting battle in Britain is about much more than the regulation of TV. It is a fight for the very nature of the news media in the UK and possibly beyond.

[James Murdoch](#) has given a rallying war cry for those who believe that the free market is the guarantor of freedom. In a speech to a Marketing organisation he made some dramatic [claims](#) about the ‘absolute power of competition’ that deserve attention (and not just because his dad is Rupert):



“Without a free, unmolested media there can be no genuine free society. A democracy can only be effective and judicious if its decisions are clear to the general public, debated, challenged and scrutinised. As the Romans established, the fundamental question when examining any decision is “who gains?”. A free media allows that question to be put.”

This is stirring stuff. Full marks to the speechwriter. He says he puts his faith in the people, not regulators:

“...people are smart. They understand the media. Isn’t such “confusion and anxiety” in the minds of elites who are terrified by people taking power from them? Dealing with actual harm is one thing, but is it the job of a regulator to invent sources of potential harm and forestall them?”

If the people are so smart why does *The Sun* feel it has to its readers how to vote each election? But anyway, his speech is perhaps most interesting for its embrace of my current favourite concept, [Networked Journalism](#). I have just been writing a speech to give at a media freedom [conference](#) which I began by saying that the press is best protected by sharing power with the public. Well, that nice James Murdoch seems to agree:

“We are in the middle of a tremendous and welcome shift in power – from elites to individuals and communities. For the media, that means a shift from content controlled by a few to that created, adapted, or distributed by a multitude. Look at broadcast journalism – for so long the preserve of the state or the wealthy. It is now open to almost anyone, with technology costing less than £50. Coverage of last year’s attempted bomb attack at Glasgow airport was better and faster because of immediate access to material provided by witnesses from their mobile phones. These people are partners, as well as an audience, in the act of creating a product.”

Of course, [James Murdoch](#) represents a series of News Corporation business interests that will only benefit from a liberalisation of regulation and a reduction in public subsidy for his competitors such as the BBC and Channel 4. But that doesn’t mean he’s wrong.

We’ll be debating the public service broadcasting review here at Polis in early June with some senior Ofcom figures – email us for details at polis@lse.ac.uk

