The seven capital sins of corporate-owned media: how ownership concentration curtails media freedoms in Europe

*In the wake of the High-Level Group's report on media freedom and pluralism, **Benedetta Brevini**, journalist and Lecturer in media policy at City University London, illustrates why the European Commission may wish to take a more proactive role in regulating corporate-owned media.*

For the first time since the adoption of the Charter of Fundamental rights, which underlines the crucial importance of media pluralism for EU democracy, an Independent report commissioned by the European Commission vigorously recognizes that the main challenges to media freedoms in the EU come from corporate media ownership. Produced by the High expert group set up by the European Commission Vice-President Neelie Kroes, the report lists the seven capital sins of corporate-owned media that generate some of the most insidious challenges to media freedoms in Europe. According to the report, these are excessive concentration of ownership of commercial media, the ever tighter links between media tycoons, advertising companies and politicians, and ruthless profit making agendas of some commercial media entities. The recommendations included in the report support many of the suggestions put forward by the Media Reform Coalition and more specifically they underwrite the Coalition's calls for media ownership limits. When reading this *j'accuse* document, one is reminded of the staggering preface to the study on media performance conducted in the US by Herman and Chomsky in 1988:

If … the powerful are able to fix the premises of discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear and think about and to 'manage' public opinion by regular propaganda campaigns, the standard [liberal-pluralist] view of how the media system works is at serious odds with reality.

Thus, the High Level Group document explains in detail how most challenges to media freedoms in the EU come from abuses of corporate media ownership.

Interestingly, the report mentions explicitly the UK case as an example of systemic media failure with "gross abuses of journalistic privilege". The Leveson Inquiry has showed new striking cases that exemplify how the exercise of unchecked, highly concentrated and dominant media power can serve to undermine the proper conduct of democracy. The first corporate media sin listed in the report is therefore "excessive influence of media owners or advertising clients on politicians and government and the covert manipulation of political decisions in favour of hidden economic interests."

The second challenge is the "concentration of ownership of commercial media and the influence this might have in the political space". The report makes explicit the reference to the UK case by condemning "concentration of all media in the hands of foreign owners". It also overtly refers to the Italian and Hungarian cases when censoring "concentration of ownership in the hands of ruling politicians" and "concentration of all media in a country within the hands of a single owner". But- according to the report- there is another alarming problem caused by consolidated-corporate-media ownership: "media concentration reduces the quality of Journalism". Market-driven media may be more inclined to produce cheaper forms of news that attracts advertisers, but not necessarily cover adequately key public interest issues.

The fourth challenge is determined by "the erosion in the quality of working conditions and job security for journalists". As we know too well, market fragmentation and global competition have

generated a firm decline of advertising revenue for many news outlets. In most cases, in order to stay profitable, media outlets have increased the number of news outputs while cutting back the workforce.

The fifth challenge identified by the report is the “lack of media ownership transparency and opacity of funding sources”. Access Info Europe and the Open Society Media Programme have just recently produced a study on this topic, and found that in 9 of the 20 European countries investigated, it is not possible for the public to find out who the actual owners of the media are—either through media-specific reporting or through company registers.

The sixth sin of corporate media relates to the crucial profit-making bias of market-driven media, with journalists that are pushed to “resort to criminal activity in their search for sensational (and profit-making) stories”, of which Leveson has accumulated an impressive amount of distrubing evidence. Finally, the High Level group concludes with the last challenge: “potential conflicts of interest arising from journalists’ closeness to business interests”.

The report rightly argues that the strong link between media freedom and pluralism and EU democracy “justifies a more extensive competence of the EU with respect to these fundamental rights” than with other rights recognized by the Charter. If these are the seven capital sins of corporate-owned media, we should expect further action to protect media freedom from the European Commission. It remains to be seen whether the proposals of the European Commission will be implemented soon or whether they will have the same fate of that facing Leveson’s recommendations as politicians try to delay and obfuscate. But, in the meantime, this report has put media ownership at the centre of the European agenda. There are reasons to be optimistic.

Benedetta Brevini’s original post appeared on the Media Reform Coalition‘s website on 2 February 2013.

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