Breaking the Silence: The Case for Media Ownership Reform

Political parties may be in stalemate over the underpinnings for a new self-regulator for the press, but Justin Schlosberg of Birkbeck, University of London and author of Power Beyond Scrutiny: Media Justice and Accountability argues that the problem policymakers should be dealing with is ownership concentration.

A recent report produced by the Media Reform Coalition highlights a paradox in media ownership debates post-Leveson. On the one hand, it's no secret that ownership of the media has been de-regulated in most western democracies over recent decades. On the other hand – and here is the crux of the paradox – there remains both in the UK and elsewhere a widespread political consensus that media ownership should be regulated, and that existing rules have not been up to the task. Ofcom has recommended to the government that it undertake regular audits of media plurality and the European Commission is currently considering similar recommendations; politicians of all colours have openly called for new caps on media ownership – including Ed Miliband and John Major testifying before Leveson; and polls suggest substantial public support for new limits on media ownership in the UK. Yet the ownership issue was comprehensively sidelined by Leveson and is being excluded entirely by those currently shaping the future of UK media regulation.

What seems certain is that regular reviews of media plurality will not be enough to offset enduring press power both in terms of political influence and audience reach. In regards to the former, the Leveson hearings laid bare a political class brought to heel by the Murdoch empire, complicit in covering crimes of which, in some cases, they themselves were victims. But whether politicians are in thrall of their media masters or the other way round, the intimate relations that have been exposed between media and political elites fits a Europe-wide pattern that has been intensified since the global economic collapse. It reflects, in short, the 'Berlusconization' of British political culture: an ever closer alliance between media and political centres of power.

The pivotal question is: why is nothing being done about this overriding lesson from hackgate? One common answer is that any system of ownership caps or thresholds applied to the press is an outdated solution; that it doesn't take account of the structural decline facing newspapers and the emergence of new gatekeepers online. But one of the great oddities of the digital age is that whilst newspapers are facing an unprecedented assault on revenues, the likes of the *Daily Mail* and the *Guardian* are reaching record numbers of readers courtesy of their online editions. Far from detracting from their influence, Google, MSN, Facebook, Twitter and Yahoo are in reality amplifying the voice of the national press through aggregation and personalisation; not to mention the enduring agenda setting influence of the press over television – perhaps best exemplified by coverage of the Leveson report itself.

Others argue – including voices from within the media reform movement – that ownership concerns are valid but secondary to the problem of regulating journalist ethics– and in particular, abuse of privacy laws. According to the dominant narrative of hackgate, the principle and certainly 'worthiest' victims of hacking are the innocent and ordinary civilians: the Dowlers, McCanns, etc. But the somewhat awkward reality is that the vast majority of hacking victims are wealthy, famous and powerful people – a fact that sections of the press have sought to make a meal of in their attempts to undermine the media reform campaign. In one sense they are right. Of course the privacy of individuals regardless of their status should be respected and of course those who have violated their privacy should be held to account. But this is not the biggest public interest concern to emerge out of hackgate.

The fact that redress is being targeted at rank and file journalists – rather than their bosses – is nothing new when it comes to scandals which rock the foundations of state-corporate power. When the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib unearthed evidence of a top down policy of torture within the US military and defence establishment, this was largely ignored by the mainstream media which focused overwhelmingly on the isolated actions of a handful of soldiers. [1] We should not allow the same mistake to happen here, on an issue so foundational to the health of our democracy and integrity of our public institutions. We should not allow the lobbying leverage of powerful individuals to detract from the reality that it is the owners of the media who bare ultimate responsibility for abuses of press power. And it is ownership concentration which lies at the root of the endemic institutional corruption that hackgate exposed.

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[1] Bennett, W. L., Lawrence, R. et al. (2006). 'None Dare Call it Torture: Indexing and the limits of press independence in the Abu Ghraib scandal.' *Journal of Communication* 56(3):18.

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