

Why a Citizens' Initiative on Media Pluralism? Interview with Granville Williams



Granville Williams at the launch of the UK campaign to for signatures on the EIMP

*A European Citizens Initiative on Media Freedom and Pluralism is currently underway and the organisers are aiming to get 1 million signatures from across the EU. This kind of mechanism is not familiar to most people and has not been used in relation to media issues before, so the Media Policy Project decided to find out more about it from the **UK organiser Granville Williams**.*

Sally: What does it mean that the issues of media freedom and pluralism are being undertaken as a citizen's initiative?

Granville: The formation of media policy, both at a European and UK level, is largely the preserve of politicians, media companies and lobbyists with specific interests to pursue. The public is absent from the process. By doing a European Citizen's Initiative – gathering 1 million signatures – we are calling on the European Commission to make a legislative proposal, something that could lead to a Directive. What is refreshing and innovative about this particular citizens' initiative is that it creates a public space for a diverse range of people across the EU to express their support for an essential foundation of democratic societies, media pluralism.

The initiative also addresses the other important issue of media freedom – how you ensure through independent regulation that political or commercial interests do not subvert or control media for their own narrow ends.

Sally: That is certainly a big question here in the UK at the moment, but as you know there is also a lot of resistance in the UK to the EU and its involvement in British affairs. Why do you think the EU should be addressing this and not national governments?

Granville: I am always cautious about how widespread or deep resistance really is in the UK to the EU's involvement in British affairs. It is certainly the case that for decades we have had four newspaper groups – News Corporation, *The Telegraph*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Express* – which have had a consistently hostile editorial stance towards the EU and carried caricatured reporting of its activities. This does inevitably have an impact.

Indeed one politician's response to the initiative reminded me of the character Smike, brutalised by Mr Squeers in the Dickens novel *Nicholas Nickleby*. The politician feared that the initiative would provoke the ire of these newspaper groups and therefore wouldn't support it. Like Smike he ducked before a blow was even struck.

I see the initiative as opening up a kind of second front. We need to ensure issues of media plurality are prominent in debates around the forthcoming UK government Communications White Paper. But the very power of media groups can be a block towards media reform at a national level and so the initiative is an important step towards Europe-wide action too.

Sally: The EU recently launched a consultation on its competences in relation to the issues of media freedom and pluralism as well as one on the independence of regulatory bodies responsible for audiovisual media. Does that not fulfil what the initiative is asking for? If not why?



Granville: I was really pleased to read the High Level expert group's report published in January and the speech by EC vice President Neelie Kroes in Dublin on 22 March. I thought her speech showed a new openness on the part of the Commission to consider extending its competences to media pluralism and regulation. I certainly want to do all I can to ensure that the two consultations are responded to positively by a wide range of individuals and organisations.

However consultations on their own will not provide enough stimulus or dynamic. Think about the UK experience over phone-hacking and the News Corporation plan to take full control of BSkyB. Concerns about both issues generated extensive public opposition. 'Clicktivism' came into its own around opposition to the BSkyB takeover and Hacked Off became a focus for press reform. Of course the sterling work of *The Guardian* on phone hacking was vital but those extra dimensions and spaces created by the public voicing their concerns was an essential component.

I see the initiative as providing clear and concrete evidence at a European level that people want and support action. The consultations certainly will help with our work around the initiative, but they don't in any way substitute for it.

Sally: So those processes may be mutually reinforcing, but how does what the initiative is asking from Brussels interact with the processes going on here in the UK on press reform stemming from the Leveson Inquiry?

Granville: The Leveson Inquiry and Report gave invaluable insights into the power and influence of media groups, like Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, over UK politics since the 1970s. One outcome from the report's recommendations will, I hope, be a new form of more independent press regulation. However a big gap in the Leveson Report was that it did not make any specific policy recommendations on media plurality.

The initiative is a second chance to raise issues about media pluralism both at a European and UK level. It is interesting that the House of Lords Communications Committee in its call for evidence for its inquiry into media pluralism makes specific reference the initiative. That shows that we are beginning to raise awareness for the initiative only weeks after its official launch in Brussels.

Sally: So what are the next steps?

Granville: We need the million signatures. The UK launch was a good start but the next job is to get media coverage. I'm realistic though about the prospect of positive coverage in most newspapers, if we get it at all. We also want to link the initiative into the online activist networks built up around the News International bid for BSkyB and the phone hacking issues. This is vital. We're also about to start an online campaign through Facebook ads to target specific people in the UK who are likely to sign the initiative.

There will also be lots of events and opportunities over the coming months to enable us to publicise and win support for the initiative. My appeal to all our supporters is to help us to have the maximum impact.

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