

NUJ Calls for Serious Action on Media Plurality and Caps on Ownership



*On 17 May the House of Lords Communications Committee published the evidence it received in its consultation on media plurality. With the committee now considering this evidence **Michelle Stanistreet** of the **National Union of Journalists** argues for set ownership caps and special protection for local media.*

The phrases “Waiting for Godot” and “pushed into the long grass” were recently used by peers when describing the government’s response to Lord Leveson’s recommendations on the need for greater clarity on the meaning of media plurality and the role of politicians in making decisions in relation to plurality. The House of Lords Communications Committee is now considering the subject, and during a brief debate in Parliament there was obvious frustration at the Culture Secretary’s lack of response.

As the evidence clearly showed at the **Leveson Inquiry**, it was the overwhelming power enjoyed by certain parts of the media, particularly News International, which led to many of the unethical and illegal methods employed by the press. This power bred arrogance by newspaper executives who believed they were untouchable.

Politicians, at their own admission, were too craven to take on the Murdoch press because they feared they would be pursued personally or their party’s policies would be savaged. Prime minister after prime minister felt they had to pay homage at the court of Rupert. Likewise, within the police – particularly the Met – an unhealthy relationship developed between officers and News International papers.

Why does media plurality matter? The NUJ believes that media plurality is vital for a healthy, functioning democracy. Citizens need to hear a range of arguments and have equal access to information and opinions to participate in local and national democracy. Countries which have a large number of newspapers and an independent media are less susceptible to corruption by politicians and business.

Rupert Murdoch maintained that he does not dictate an editorial line in his papers. If that is the case, then why did all but one of his 175 newspapers have the same pro-war line on Iraq? John Major said he was told by the media mogul that he would withdraw the support of his newspapers unless the prime minister changed his policy on the UK’s membership of the EU.

During the past two decades, media law in the UK has been about deregulation and attempts to limit media power have been dismissed. The imperative has been to open up media markets, promote light touch regulation and competition. The result has been a media landscape typified as one of merger, takeover and agglomeration of major media groups.

International comparisons show most countries recognise that media ownership needs to be regulated in a different way to other assets because of its role in a democratic society and, likewise, competition law cannot be applied in the same way. In 2007, the **Council of Europe recommended** that countries “limit the influence which a single person, company or group may have in one or more media sector”.

Ofcom defines media plurality as ensuring there is a diversity of viewpoints available, and consumed, across and within media enterprises; and preventing any one media owner or voice

having too much influence over public opinion and the political agenda. Yet, if the hacking scandal had not broken precisely when it did, the then culture secretary, Jeremy Hunt would have agreed News Corporation's proposal to take total control of BSkyB by acquiring the remaining 60.9 per cent of its shares. News Corp already owned a third of newspaper circulation and the merged company would have had a reach of 52 per cent of the adult population.

And, as was revealed during the Leveson Inquiry, a lobbyist acting on behalf of News Corp had extraordinary access to the office of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, during the time when the BskyB deal was being adjudicated.

Modern technology has radically changed the way the world has access to news and information – in the ways news is generated and the way it is received. In theory, the greater the sources of news and the wider the plurality of media, the better it is. Yet, cross-ownership and deals between news organisations and online services and networks and mobile telephone companies can confuse the consumer about the source of the information and fool them into thinking that a news service is “neutral”. The capacity to create bundles – with deals with a telephone company, online publisher or social networks – gives media organisations the opportunity for a far greater reach on a number of platforms. It also becomes more difficult for the consumer to disentangle the connections and influence.

The NUJ believes that the House of Lords is right to launch this consultation into media plurality. In our submission we have made specific demands. Action must be taken – but with no mention of a Communications bill in the Queen's Speech, it looks likely the issue will continue to be fudged and avoided. It was a decade ago that the last communications legislation was passed; the media landscape is unrecognisable from then.

We want to see the maximum market share set at 25 per cent across all platforms and on each of the following platforms: radio, television, newspapers and online. The maximum share for news should apply to UK-wide provision.

The NUJ believes that any market share that reaches or is liable to reach 15 per cent should be subject to a public interest test. Private firms would be required to divest so that their share does not exceed 25 per cent. Alternatively, relevant holdings may be organised as public trusts or other publicly governed and accountable structures, following a public interest test review and agreement.

The NUJ believes the government must step in to protect the local newspaper sector, now under the control of a handful of publishers, as the sector is being run down and titles closed. Local papers should be deemed community assets and be protected under the [Localism Act 2011](#). The government should investigate provision of subsidies, levies and tax advantages to help preserve a plural, independent local press.

Media plurality is promoted by a media which is representative of its consumers. [Research from 2006](#), by the education charity Sutton, showed that more than half (54%) of 100 leading news and current affairs journalists were privately educated. Just under two-fifths (37 per cent) who went to university graduated from one institution, Oxford. That is why the NUJ is campaigning for equality and diversity in the media and is fighting against unpaid internships which have become a gateway to the industry for only the rich and already-connected.

Photo by Jason Harris

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