

London Live Goes Live: What about Media Plurality in UK's Capital?



*London's new local television channel, London Live is due to launch on the 31st of March. Its owner also owns the city's largest circulation local newspaper and two national newspapers. University of East London's **Jonathan Hardy** discusses the implications for media plurality arguing that the key question is how the new service will be regulated.*

What should supporters of media plurality make of the launch of London Live by the owner of the *Evening Standard*, *The Independent* and *I?* Having grown up in a time when 'one owner, one outlet' was a plausible, if never orthodox, proposal, the London Live launch might demonstrate how obsolescent that call sounds and how far media consolidation aids diversity. London is about to have a long-overdue television service that recruits talent from across one of the greatest cauldrons of creativity in the world.

Five bids were made and Alexander and Evgeny Lebedev's Evening Standard Television (ESTV) won the licence. So should this have been refused in order to foster greater plurality of ownership, given that the winning bid comes from the company with the strongest print presence covering Greater London? Can advocates of plurality argue against a service that will increase plurality and might provide a channel for news and entertainment worthy of London? The licence, awarded for up to 12 years, requires at least four hours of 'fresh' news and 100 per cent 'London-based content'. For me, the answer is not to argue *against* the service, but rather to argue that media plurality is about how the service is regulated.

Media plurality and what to do

Where there is not a diversity of media suppliers, for whatever reason, the issue for media plurality policy is what to do. How can greater plurality be achieved, either by means of the range of content and voices heard (internal plurality), by ensuring independent news values (impartiality), or by regulating how the service runs to prevent or restrict problems arising from ownership, control, commercial interests, advertisers and other influences.

London Live has been **heavily trailed** in the *Evening Standard* with daily page-long sections, plus other news stories, adverts and graphics to promote the launch. London Live will have news programmes hosted by the editor of *The Independent* and so visual branding and editorial promotion across the Independent's media interests is likely to start strong and grow from there. The business case for such cross-promotion is overwhelming and axiomatic. Ofcom approved the *Evening Standard's* 'strong position to launch and maintain its proposed service, given its proposals for promoting and marketing the channel.' Whether such cross-promotion is good for editorial coverage, for news quality and independence, for competitors, and for London viewers is to say the least uncertain.

Balancing creative industries and consumers

So what are the implications of London Live for the broader debate on media plurality policy now taking place? The arrangement here, statutory licensing (following a competitive bid process), provides a comparatively straightforward mechanism through which to apply conditions, even if the actual licence requirements fall short as they do here. Yet the quandary of whether to allow a major media voice in London to extend further into television, underscores **the call** by the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom and others for new approaches.

We need arrangements to address media plurality that are broad and flexible enough to address changes in media markets, investor interest and commercial viability. The arrangements must serve the needs of our creative industries but balance this by safeguarding the interests of citizens and consumers.

Ofcom should have powers to take action when firms have a significant share or influence in markets. The threshold for plurality action will vary across markets but in general should apply when firms have a share of supply or revenue above 15 per cent. Where plurality concerns are moderate, enterprises should be expected to comply with relevant industry and regulatory standards. Where plurality concerns are more severe, Ofcom should have powers to enforce divestment of firms or undertakings made in lieu of divestment. Such undertakings will include remedies to strengthen and safeguard plurality and accountability by enterprises. Licences for new services should only favour firms already dominant in markets when safeguards for plurality are secured.

Going beyond the boundaries of a single corporate vision

For London Live that should mean that the service is obliged to demonstrate that editorial content and agendas are not unduly skewed to promote the corporate media and business interests of the commercial firm providing the service. There should also be action to strengthen 'internal pluralism' so that different media content producers have access to the London audience. When cable TV services were introduced in the early 1980s the licence agreements required that space was granted to smaller independent and community-based video producers. While such requirements were as short-lived as the soon closed or consolidated cable licensees does not detract from their merit.

In the digital age it is sobering how little material from beyond the established commercial or public service providers gets any airing across multichannel television. A channel that could combine the undoubted strengths of a cross-media business operation, with public regulation that protected against those intra-corporate entanglements, and expanded the range of voices and suppliers beyond the boundaries of a single corporate vision, would be a precious and fitting contributor to media plurality in the media city of London.

This article gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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