

A Predictable Act of Political Cowardice: The Government's Response on Media Ownership



*We've briefly come back from our summer recess (until August 18) to share this response from **Steven Barnett**, Professor of Communications at the University of Westminster, who is directing an AHRC funded project on Media Power and Plurality. His detailed analysis of government policy inaction, co-authored with Judith Townend, has just been published in *The Political Quarterly*: 'And What Good Came of it at Last' **Press–Politician Relations Post-Leveson**. In this post he argues that the recently published Government response to the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications Report into Media Plurality is*

another act of political cowardice in the ongoing media plurality debates.

If one week is a long time in politics, three years are an eternity. Remember those heady days in July 2011, as the phone-hacking scandal broke and unanimous condemnation from our political leaders' reflected public revulsion? It wasn't just the criminal acts targeting young or vulnerable victims that prompted a popular outcry, but the manifest abuse of untrammelled corporate power that had allowed one company to get away with it for so long. Something, they all agreed, must be done.

Speaking in the House of Commons just days after the hacking scandal broke, David Cameron was explicit about the need for action: "[the] challenge is how we address the vexed issue of media power. We need competition policy to be properly enforced. We need a sensible look at the relevance of plurality and cross-media ownership.... never again should we let a media group get too powerful." In the same debate, Ed Miliband was specific about the policy changes required to deal with abuses that arise from media concentration: "The [Communications] Act needs to be updated as such a concentration of power is unhealthy."

Returning to the theme at Prime Ministers Questions on 25 April 2012, the Prime Minister made a confession and a commitment: "I think on all sides of the House there's a bit of a need for a hand on heart. We all did too much cosying up to Rupert Murdoch." Then, in response to needling from Ed Miliband, he added: "The problem of closeness between politicians and media proprietors has been going on for years and it's this government that's going to sort it out."

So how exactly did his government propose to "sort it out"? First, it waited two years before producing, in July last year, a bland consultation document on media ownership and plurality which barely scratched the surface of a now patently discredited and ineffectual plurality regime. It then waited thirteen months – and six months after a Lords parliamentary committee had produced a rather more comprehensive set of recommendations – before finally slipping out a response to both documents last Wednesday, under cover of summer holidays.

Government proposals at this stage of an electoral cycle were always going to be dull, narrowly focussed and risk-averse. Even so, this is a feeble response. Its opening contextual statement sets the



Cameron said competition policy should be enforced.

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tone for the policy inertia that follows: government will not explore changes to existing legislation until a new “measurement framework and baseline assessment” have been delivered. Therefore its response “does not seek to review existing regulatory and policy levers, nor does it seek to propose potential remedies.” In other words, the tub-thumping rhetoric of three years ago about curbing the power of unaccountable media barons has quietly surrendered to the pragmatism of electioneering.

Even within the narrow confines of its own consultation questions, this is a vapid document. Essentially, it has taken 13 months for the government to conclude that a plurality measurement framework should include online; should be restricted to news and current affairs; should include news aggregators; should include the BBC (though not in terms of remedies); and should include “some consideration” of local and regional markets. And that's it. This simplistic approach has therefore excluded any assessment of how the public interest plurality test should be updated, the need for periodic plurality reviews, the involvement of government ministers in the decision-making process, or the need for streamlining a complex regulatory process. It leaves untouched the regime which was proved to be wholly inadequate during Murdoch's attempt to acquire the whole of BSkyB. In short, it has severely circumscribed the fundamental issue of how to sustain media plurality within a healthy democracy, and what policy decisions should flow from that.

Ofcom will now be commissioned “to develop a suitable set of indicators to inform the measurement framework for media plurality”. And while media moguls continue to expand, amalgamate, acquire and consolidate their power and influence, the Prime Minister who promised to “sort it out” has suddenly gone missing.

This foot-dragging has been an entirely predictable act of abject political cowardice. The last time any government was foolhardy enough to produce serious changes in media ownership legislation in advance of a general election was in 1996, when John Major courageously insisted on preventing newspaper owners with over 20% of national circulation from acquiring terrestrial TV stations. There might have been one or two other reasons for the Murdoch newspapers' wholesale switch to supporting Tony Blair a year later, but it would scarcely have improved his mood. Even with a majority of 179, Blair's government postponed its own proposals on media ownership until after the 2001 election. And if it can't be done with huge majorities or after unprecedented revelations of corporate corruption, there is frankly little hope for any significant legislative change under any future government.

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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