

Digital distributors cannot escape their editorial responsibilities



*Andrew Miller has been CEO of **Guardian Media Group** (GMG) since July 2010. He has presided over a five year transformation programme that has seen the Guardian shift from a print-based organisation to one that is digital-first in both philosophy and practice. Here, in a post based on his **Polis Media Agenda Talk**, he discusses the role played by digital intermediaries in the Guardian's open strategy, warning of their size and influence and outlining the need for them to face up to their editorial responsibilities.*

Being open is a core principle of the Guardian. It drives everything we do and goes back to the values CP Scott set out in 1921. It's the idea that a news organisation can give a better account of the world by harnessing the unleashed power where everyone can publish. Openness takes down the walls between journalist and reader, and it encourages more interaction with the reader or viewer. It gives a richer picture of the world by collaborating with the new digital landscape, not fighting it. Under the brilliant editorship of Alan Rusbridger, the open web has helped transform the Guardian from the ninth biggest newspaper in the UK to the **number one quality English-language newspaper website** in the world. This has been made possible thanks to the open, interconnected nature of the Internet, which has made the Guardian's journalism available on the global newsstand that is the world wide web.

Technology juggernauts come with a health warning

Google, Twitter, Facebook and other social platforms play a key role in driving this open two-way relationship with our readers and we see them as our partners and collaborators, not the destroyers of everything we hold dear. Traffic to the Guardian increasingly comes from social sharing; in fact, 50% of our traffic comes via search and social. We welcome the mutual benefits such relationships bring, but there are health warnings.

I have concerns about the size and the influence that these digital platforms wield. Many of the Guardian's counterparts across Europe are currently focused on prosecuting the case against Google's alleged abuse of its dominant position in search. But Google, Twitter and Facebook are global companies – and it's not surprising, therefore, that they act in ways which favour their own interests. They also all sit within an EU framework, which means competition authorities can seek remedies if necessary – and will rightly impose them.

Any regulation must be consensual and carefully considered

But my caution to the EU and policy makers is to reflect on these frameworks and to consider if they can really be effective when the internet has no regard for international boundaries. These companies are beyond the reach of most national regulators. Supranational companies need supranational regulators, a responsibility which ultimately falls to the EU. The EU needs to think carefully and for the long-term about what appropriate regulation looks like. It needs to prepare the EU's digital economy for the future, not to protect the EU economy of the past. Knee-jerk reactions that simply placate local publishing interests risk Europe being by-passed or closed off from the many benefits these companies offer. Any action must be taken in conjunction with other governments; otherwise, Europe risks becoming a digital backwater.

Digital distributors cannot have it both ways

On the flipside, these digital distributors cannot escape their editorial responsibilities. Editing on these platforms will become more and more essential in order to avoid dangerous, damaging,

inflammatory material from being treated as legitimate information. It's happening now: Twitter trolling and the rise of the bullies, [Facebook making changes to its gender selection option](#), [Buzzfeed having to apologise for plagiarism](#). Whether you're a legacy franchise, a philanthropic digital or, to put it bluntly, a start-up that's for sale, every media company is having to wake up to the harsh realities that face them. Newspapers have spent the last 100 years honing these essential skills and experience – and they cost money.

More than that, are these companies being somewhat disingenuous? On the one hand, they want to be open and agnostic platforms for the distribution of content, with the cost infrastructure of being digital. On the other hand, they make the majority of their revenues from media-related advertising.

I think they need to be more candid about what they want to be: platforms without editorial responsibility or media companies with the organisational framework in place to make big editorial decisions? If they are media companies then by necessity they can accept the revenues that brings. But they also need to accept the responsibility created by the necessary regulation that entails.

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.

November 12th, 2014 | [Featured](#), [Guest Blog](#), [Media Plurality and Ownership](#), [The Plurality](#)

[Dialogue](#) | [0 Comments](#)

☺