

Half empty or full? The politics of measuring media plurality



Justin Schlosberg of Birkbeck, University of London looks at why the media ownership and plurality debates are stuck on the issue of measurement and argues that better assessment is needed before the right metrics can be chosen.

Ofcom's latest **consultation** on measuring media plurality asks at the outset 'what, if anything, should be added to the measurement framework?' This question itself is symptomatic of the ever lengthening grass into which this issue has been kicked, along with the politics and power play that lies behind it. Since the phone hacking scandal erupted in 2011, we have had no less than five public inquiries looking into media ownership and plurality, and yet we still seem to be stuck at the first hurdle of measurement. What's more, at every step the 'basket of measures' that make up Ofcom's preferred approach has become increasingly full and is now over-flowing. A more pertinent question is therefore not what should be added, but what should be taken out.

The problem can be simply stated as this: the broader the array of measures and indicators adopted, the greater the element of interpretation afforded to any decision-making as regards plurality 'sufficiency'. Just as plurality can be thought of in many different ways, so it can be measured in many different ways. But that does not mean that all indicators are of equal value. No matter what happens to the media landscape over the coming years, some indicators will paint a more or less plural picture than others, effectively making it extremely difficult for policymakers to intervene on plurality grounds even when there is a strong case for doing so. The DCMS **Report** on Media Ownership and Plurality already sets the threshold for such intervention at a very high level. The more 'diluted' the system of plurality measurement, the more it ultimately favours precisely those interests whose power it is intended to check.

For example, Ofcom's consultation document states that "share of consumption is a good proxy for measuring the ability to influence in the news media market; and reach and multi-sourcing are good proxies for the diversity of viewpoints consumed". Whilst the first of these indicators (share of consumption) is reasonably un-contentious, the second is highly problematic. To understand why, we need to drill down into the detail of what is meant by 'multi-sourcing', a buzz-word among industry lobbyists and policymakers alike. On the surface, it refers simply to consumers getting their news from more than one source, a phenomenon that is increasingly apparent in the online sphere. But things start to get messy when we consider what counts as a 'source' in this sense.

Originators and aggregators

Ofcom try to clarify the picture by distinguishing between 'content originators' (those who produce original news), 'aggregators' (those who compile news stories produced by others) and 'intermediaries' (those who merely direct consumers to the websites of content originators or aggregators). But it's not clear how this distinction could be applied when actually measuring and assessing plurality online. For instance, in the Kantar news omnibus **survey** for Ofcom in 2014, respondents were asked which online sources they 'use for news nowadays' and presented with a list of options that included content originators alongside aggregators and intermediaries. So in effect, the survey question framed them all as news sources of equal weight and value. To illustrate how this can distort the plurality picture, let's consider a hypothetical example.

Imagine that respondent A and B are both avid online news consumers and have both been following a recent prominent news story about tax evasion prior to participating in a news consumption survey. They also share a tendency to gravitate towards the editorial slant offered on the story by both the *Guardian* and the *Mail* online. Respondent A is conscious of her preference

for these outlets and tends to visit their websites directly. She therefore selects them from the list appended to the question ‘which of the following do you use for news nowadays’. Respondent B is relatively less brand-loyal but no less inclined towards the same stories either on aggregators and intermediaries alike. He recalls reading them either in full or as snippets on Yahoo, Google News and Facebook, which make up his selection in response to the same survey question.

The data then reveal that between them, these respondents consume five different news sources. But it fails to capture the fact that not only have they based their answers on consumption of the same news agenda, but also the same selection of stories produced by the same two providers. So their answers suggest a picture of news diversity that simply does not reflect the reality of their consumption.

It stands to reason that those who maintain editorial control over news output have a prior influence in shaping the news agenda and should not be considered in tandem with those that may merely amplify their voices. The sale of newspapers has always been influenced to some extent by retailer selection, point of sale prominence and promotions, etc. Of course, aggregators and intermediaries play a relatively more interventionist role in influencing the reach of particular news stories, outlets and agendas. But that is a separate plurality issue that should be considered within a separate framework, lest we end up comparing apples with oranges. The logic of multi-sourcing according to industry lobbyists is that an increase in the share or reach of an online aggregator comes at the *expense* of traditional or ‘legacy’ media influence. But in fact, it could have the exact opposite effect.

Carefully combining metrics

Of course, no measure of plurality on its own is flawless and it makes sense to rely on more than one set of metrics or standards. Some of the measures contained within the current framework represent sensible and reliable indicators, notably consumption metrics based on standard data collected by industry. But when used in conjunction with other, less pertinent indicators, there is a serious risk of muddying the waters in ways that obscure the ability of particular entities to dominate public conversation.

All this matters because the glaring omission from recent inquiries into media plurality concerns not the measurement, but the assessment. The closest we have gotten to this elephant in the room is when the Secretary of State **asked** Ofcom – with characteristic vagueness – to provide guidance on the advantages and disadvantages of providing ‘additional guidance or indicative levels’ in regard to plurality sufficiency, and ‘how they might be made to work’.

Ofcom’s response was equally **vague** and heavily caveated by its reminder that “it would be for Parliament to consider whether it can provide any further guidance on how sufficiency should be defined.” However, without such guidance “it may have to be left to the discretion of the reviewing body to consider sufficiency” and provide guidance instead. This guidance “is most likely to take the form of indicative ranges, with additional qualitative guidance as to how those ranges should be interpreted.”

In the three years and three public inquiries since then, we have moved no further on this thorny but critical issue. In the end of course, any framework of measurement means very little without a basis for assessing how plural or diverse our media landscape really is, and what should be done about concentrated media power. The existing regime has failed precisely because of the absence of clear bright lines which could form the basis of transparent plurality decisions. The more we squeeze into the basket, the more we recreate those conditions of capture that have undermined faith in the current system, and which will permanently favour the status quo.

This blog 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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