

## How not to measure the news plurality problem



*As Ofcom proposes measuring news consumption to assess media plurality in the UK, **Martin Moore**, Director of the **Media Standards Trust**, carries out an experiment to measure his news consumption over the course of a single day. How easily can news consumption be measured, and how do we define what counts as ‘news’ in the first place? Moore examines the challenges that Ofcom will face and suggests that measuring news consumption might not allow Ofcom to address the central purpose of plurality: that of ensuring diverse viewpoints are heard.*

What news did you consume yesterday? And do you remember which sources it came from? I asked myself these questions a short while ago, when preparing to respond to **Ofcom’s proposals on measuring news plurality**, and found myself struggling not just with my memory but with figuring out what constituted ‘news’, and who or what counted as a ‘source’. Perhaps this just shows my personal intellectual shortcomings, but it struck me it might also illustrate the problems Ofcom – and the policy makers who have to make decisions on its evidence – will have when **they try to use media consumption to assess plurality, as they have said they will do.**

### My news diet

So what news did I consume that day? When I got up I flicked through BBC news on my mobile, though that included scanning the newspaper front pages – did that count as one source or nine? Scanning through my various Twitter feeds in Hootsuite I learnt lots of ‘news’, but how do I distinguish between a film review by someone I know (‘Everest is fantastic’), a self-revelation, and a retweeted link to an editorial column? Are they all news? Are none of them? Do the people I follow even count as news sources? Or is it only the news they link to – if they link (even if I don’t click on the link)?

Some of the links I did click on led me from Twitter to blogs, some went to political websites like ConservativeHome and LabourList, some to government or organisation websites. Did they count as news sources? On my computer I scrolled through my feedly.com RSS reader, which collects headlines and first sentences from about fifty plus sources, including industry sites like Boing Boing, university sites like the LSE Media Policy Project, and NGOs like FullFact. Do I count all those? Or just the ones I clicked through to?

Turning to my email inbox I found emails from news aggregators like Nuzzel, from media monitoring services like the Guardian’s media briefing and Quartz, from Medium’s Daily Digest, from Quora (do questions count as news?), from industry and political news sites like Re/Code and Politico, from NGOs like Greenpeace, and petition sites like 38 Degrees (are petitions news?). Oh, and I flicked through a few of the news apps on my phone: Flipboard, Prismatic, and Pulse.

That was just in the morning. This does not count all the news I was exposed to but did not read as I was scrolling through my Facebook news feed, or updating my connections on LinkedIn – some of whom had published stories, or cross-linked to stories. It ignores the ambient push news that flashed up on my mobile. And, of course it does not take into any of the analogue news I picked up from TV, radio, print papers, freesheets, and the giant plasma news screen I passed at the train station.

### A Sisyphean Task



To catalogue my consumption of news would be quite a chore. To catalogue and analyse it, and then assess the extent to which I was exposed to diverse news sources from a plurality of providers with a combination of perspectives, would be a Sisyphean task, as well as involving subjective discretion. Then to make a judgment as to whether it was diverse enough, and take action on the basis of it, would be nigh on impossible without a clear basis of what constitutes 'enough'.

Yet this is what Ofcom is proposing to do, and not just for me but for a representative sample of the UK population, then use it as the basis for judging whether we have a plural news media in the UK. Measuring consumption metrics should, **Ofcom says**, 'provide a reasonable proxy for the different elements of media plurality' and should therefore 'form the foundation of any plurality assessment' (Ofcom, March 2015).

## Not a Freak

Now, I may be unusual in my news media consumption but I'm not a freak. Indeed my consumption of news is probably easier to calculate than that of Millennials (those aged 18-33), who rely more heavily on streamed news via Facebook, Snapchat or other services. Looking at young adults in the US, **the Pew Research Center recently found that** 'about six-in-ten online Millennials (61%) report getting political news on Facebook in a given week'. More broadly, the **2015 Reuters Institute Digital News Report** found that across twelve countries, 41% of people surveyed now use Facebook 'to find, read, watch, share, or comment on the news each week'.

## Existential questions

I'm not suggesting consumption measurements cannot be useful indicators, but I am suggesting that there are fundamental complexities with measuring news consumption in a digital environment, and these complexities are increasing, not decreasing. The complexities come not just from the growing availability of, and access to, published material and the increased volume of content thanks to ease of publishing, but from existential questions such as:

- How do you define news?
- How do you define a news source?
- And how do you define news exposure?

According to **the Edelman Trust Barometer published in January 2015**, Google has taken over from traditional news organisations as a trusted news source, even though it aggregates and links to, rather than gathers, news. Greenpeace, for most of us, is a campaigning charity not a news organisation. Yet Greenpeace **has just taken on a team of investigative journalists**. 38 Degrees is not a news source, but if you receive an email telling you there is only 24 hours to respond to a crucial government consultation on TTIP, isn't that news? If you then write a letter to your MP about it, isn't that political engagement, in other words one of the objectives of news plurality?

Even if Ofcom were able to successfully navigate these existential questions, it would be incredibly hard to measure news consumption metrics in a manner that was robust, comprehensive, or provided enough evidence to take action. Especially given the range of different devices through which people now consume news. And Ofcom is not even proposing to use behavioural metrics – in other words what people actually do – it is proposing to use reported consumption – i.e. what you remember.

Not only will this fail to capture consumption accurately, it will entirely miss some of the most serious plurality problems we face today, such as the decline of newsgathering and reporting, particularly at a local level.

## What is plurality supposed to achieve?

If we go back to the original purposes of plurality, as set out by Ofcom, they are:



- To ensure that there is a diversity of viewpoints available, and consumed, across and within media enterprises; and
- To prevent any one media owner, or voice, having too much influence over public opinion and the political agenda (Ofcom, 2015)

For the first, there needs to be some basis from which to judge what people should be informed about, and then the extent to which that news is being gathered and published in a regular, timely, and reasonably comprehensive, manner. For the second, there has to be a sophisticated understanding of the sources of media power and how it is used. Ofcom will not get this by measuring consumption.

Consumption is a useful indicative measure, but will be difficult to capture accurately or comprehensively and even harder to act on. If Ofcom, and the government, are seriously concerned about media plurality rather than wanting to appear concerned, they will need to do much more than simply measure consumption.

*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 and Political Science.*

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