

Brussels Moving on Murdoch?

Media pluralism has surfaced periodically in Brussels since the publication of the 1992 **European Commission Working Paper on Media Pluralism**. Policymakers have skirted around the issue of whether concentration rules can be harmonised, and the Parliament, the Council of Europe and the European Council have periodically voiced concern about the implications of media concentration for European Democracy. The Commission has funded a lot of research, but little progress has been made on new policy instruments, because the issue tends to be guarded rather jealously at the Member-State Level.

The LSE Media Policy Project can reveal however that with the support of the European Parliament, and the European Commission, a coalition of civil society organisations is in the process of organising a high level summit in Brussels, on the 27th June. Ed Richards of Ofcom and Neelie Kroes are among an illustrious list of speakers from politics and the media in what promises to be an event that reinvigorates European Policymaking on this topic.

During the Berlusconi controversy in Italy and a process of media consolidation in member states to the East, a succession of new initiatives has been launched. In 2009, Professor Peggy Valcke of the University of Leuven was appointed to develop a monitoring tool on media pluralism. The report, in which the author played a minor role as an expert on the UK, was never taken up, but it was used by the Italian regulator, Agcom to monitor the health of the Italian media system. One outcome of the current process could be more intensive monitoring of the health of European media systems, perhaps a prelude to stricter and more harmonised rules.

Simultaneously with the emergence of the phone hacking scandal in the UK, Brussels appears to be gaining momentum. In September 2011, EC Commissioner for Media, Neelie Kroes set up a **high level working group** to examine issues of media freedom and pluralism. It's first topic is state interference in media, but the terms of reference deal directly with the ethical issues raised by Phone Hacking. The terms of reference for the expert group are to examine:

- limitations to media freedom arising from political interference (state intervention or national legislation)
- limitations to media independence arising from private and commercial interference
- the question of the concentration of media ownership and its consequence for media freedom/pluralism and on the independence of journalists
- existing or potential legal threats to the protection of journalists' rights and their profession in Member States
- the role and independence of regulatory authorities
- existing or potential measures in favour of quality journalism, ethics and media accountability, within the respective competences of national, EU and international authorities.

The EC has also set up a new **research centre in Florence** that has run a series of expert conferences on the topic of media pluralism and ownership. It is not clear yet whether the high level group and the research centre amount to a new sense of purpose from the European Institutions after

the bruising events in Italy and in the UK, or whether they are the equivalent of kicking the policy ball into the long grass. Their outcome will depend on what happens in the coming months, and the willingness of Member states – now revealed as captured by corporate power – to cede some of the policy initiative to Brussels.

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