

**Media plurality measurement framework – call for inputs**  
**Response from Prof Steven Barnett, University of Westminster (Qs 1,2,7,11)**

## **The Principle**

At the heart of any discussion about plurality and its measurement lies the concept of power: for democracy to function properly, the exercise of power over public opinion, law-makers, opinion-formers and elite decision-makers must be properly distributed and not become concentrated within a small group of individuals or organisations.

It is therefore vital that the policy and regulatory framework, insofar as it concentrates on opinion formation, should pay particular attention to *impact* not just on the body politic as a whole but on specific groups which have decision-making powers that are vital to a thriving democracy: policy makers and parliamentarians; policy thinkers and opinion-formers who dictate new ideas and drive change; business and industry leaders; the judiciary, on issues around sentencing policy and approaches to criminal justice; even regulators, where legal and editorial pressure might be exerted to promote favourable decisions.

This essentially abstract definition of media power and its place within a plurality framework was implicitly addressed by Ofcom in the second of its overarching principles in its 2012 advice on *Measuring media plurality*. This defined one of the “desired outcomes of a plural market” as

“Preventing any one media owner or voice having too much *influence* over public opinion *and the political agenda*”<sup>1</sup> (my italics).

That principle was adopted by the government in its 2013 consultation and has been widely accepted as a fair operational elaboration of the democratic underpinnings of media plurality, and the benchmark for developing a measurement process to justify plurality interventions. However, despite a definitional framework which acknowledges the fundamental importance of *influence*, the proposed measurement framework almost entirely fails to carry it forward.

### **Q1. Developing other indicators**

Of the three indicators proposed in quantifying plurality in a news media market - availability, consumption and impact – the first is clearly of limited use in a world teeming with online and social media outlets since it fails to take into account reach or influence. Ofcom’s conclusion that “availability metrics are relevant in any plurality assessment, but offer limited insight and on their own are not sufficient” is therefore correct. However, Ofcom’s emphasis on **consumption** at the expense of **impact** is nowhere explained beyond impact being “difficult” to quantify or assess (which it certainly is). **Given its fundamental importance to the exercise of “power”, far greater attention and effort should be attached to impact.** Otherwise, Ofcom’s own proxy indicator for power, as outlined in its 2012 advice, risks being undermined and effectively ignored.

### **Q2. “Share of references” is an inadequate approach to both consumption *and* power**

In an era when media sectors were discrete, it was relatively easy to impose sectoral limits by audience consumption. With convergent technologies and cross-ownership now an established fact, any quantitative “currency” must permit measurement across sectoral boundaries.

However, Ofcom's "Share of References" scheme, developed for its public interest test of News Corp's proposed takeover of BSkyB in 2010, has never been seriously interrogated as a satisfactory proxy for consumption (let alone for the broader measurement of media dominance and media power).

**I believe it is seriously deficient.** It is calculated by asking respondents in a large representative survey which sources of news they use "nowadays", and how frequently. Each mention is counted separately and the figures are aggregated, culminating in a share for each news provider expressed as a proportion of all references for all news sources. While superficially attractive, it suffers from one fatal flaw which undermines its efficacy: by focussing entirely on consumption (as reported by consumers), **it exaggerates the role of television and therefore almost certainly distorts the true picture of how media power is distributed in the UK.**

According to Ofcom's 2013 report, when asked about their news sources "nowadays", 78% answered television, 40% newspapers, 35% radio and 32% the internet<sup>2</sup>. This is a wholly predictable consequence of television's ubiquity and accessibility (and the average 28 hours a week watched on various platforms).

**It is inherent in Ofcom's approach that television's penetration and popularity as a medium equates to power and influence.** But that is an assumption which is at best unproven and at worst seriously misleading. To adopt the Share of Reference schema uncritically is to miss dangerous concentrations of power elsewhere. Moreover, it is precisely the kind of metric whose results will be exploited by private media conglomerates to deflect attention from their own size and ensure that the plurality spotlight is focussed on the most highly consumed television news, provided by the BBC.

The crucial plurality question is whether this really equates to *power*. There are at least three reasons for concluding that this system substantially overstates the power of broadcast media and conversely understates the power of the written word, both in hard copy and online.

**First, this approach takes no account of the power to persuade, or the opinion-forming impact of print and online media.** Not surprisingly, given the long and difficult sociological history of "effects" studies, Ofcom concluded in 2012 that "our attempts to measure impact through quantitative research have revealed complexity in how people's opinions are formed."

Impassioned, one-sided argument is an integral and powerful element of a free press and a vibrant online environment. Britain's national newspapers, in particular, have a long tradition of being highly partisan, and its popular press in particular often elides news and comment (an issue raised more than once by politicians during their evidence to the Leveson inquiry). While we cannot know empirically to what extent such editorialising drives popular opinion, intuitively a one-sided, opinionated approach will carry more weight than a carefully balanced and detached approach. **And yet the power to exercise that passion and thus to influence hearts and minds is missing from any calculation of media concentration.**

**Second, this approach takes no account of the power to set news agendas.** The provenance of stories and where they originate is poorly researched, but it is at least arguable that our national press plays a hugely important role in setting agendas for news, debate, and opinion. Broadcast newsrooms are usually immersed in newsprint, and broadcast journalists expect their bulletins to cover stories which have featured prominently in the press.

This was confirmed by the BBC Economics Editor Robert Peston during a question and answer session following his Charles Wheeler lecture at the University of Westminster in June 2014. Asked about how the BBC decided on its news agenda, he expressed his frustration at the way in which BBC News was, in his view, “completely obsessed by the agenda set by newspapers....It’s part of the culture”.<sup>3</sup>

That this view extended beyond the BBC was confirmed the following week by John Ryley, Head of Sky News, who was asked his reaction to Peston’s comments. He replied: “I have always been shocked from the very first time I started in [TV] news at the reliance on newspapers.”<sup>4</sup>

Broadcasters regularly feature newspaper reviews: twice each evening on the Sky and BBC News channels, at the end of every edition of Newsnight, on Sunday morning’s Andrew Marr show on BBC1, with frequent mentions on programmes such as Daily Politics on TV, and the Today programme on radio. Sky News, the BBC and ITV all tweet the front pages of next day’s national newspapers. Newspaper columnists (but rarely independent bloggers) regularly feature as guest commentators on news analysis programmes.

**Third, this approach takes no account of the power to influence parliamentarians, think tankers, civil servants, regulators and others responsible for developing and implementing public policy.** In his 2013 book *Democracy Under Attack*, former Guardian journalist Malcolm Dean published a meticulously researched account of case studies which demonstrate how press influence operated in a number of social policy areas including law and order, drugs, and asylum seekers.<sup>5</sup>

In his book analysing the root causes of the phone-hacking scandal, Nick Davies suggests that Labour Party policies – including the buying in of private medical businesses by the National Health Service and a diluted form of “Sarah’s Law” – resulted directly from discussions with key figures at the Sun newspaper.<sup>6</sup> In addition, evidence to module 3 of the Leveson Inquiry offered abundant evidence of how unduly powerful media corporations can influence policy and regulatory decisions by exerting pressure on politicians. Specifically, four successive prime ministers admitted, either implicitly or explicitly, that they were bound too closely to News Corporation. That kind of power cannot be measured through consumption and “Share of References” but requires a more sophisticated analysis of “influence”.

**Any serious attempt to quantify cross-media power must be able to account for the campaigning, passion and agenda-setting characteristics of the press (both online and in print).** This is particularly important in the UK where – almost uniquely – the power of the national newspapers publishers and editors has not diminished with circulation declines, and where online and social media (in particular, Twitter and Facebook) offer further reach and magnification for established newspaper columnists.

### **Question 7: Measuring impact**

Having recognised the need for some kind of substitute metric for impact, Ofcom proposed three possible measurement “proxies”: importance, impartiality and quality of news source. Once again, all three favour the television medium, a reflection of the regulated environment which has helped to construct a strong attachment to broadcasting as a highly trusted medium. There is, however, no attempt to argue or to justify through empirical research how these three proxies might equate to *power*. It is tempting, if uncharitable, to conclude that they were chosen simply

because they were quantifiable data which were easily available and, moreover, required no further effort or expense to compile.

A far more imaginative approach is required to understanding and assessing *influence*. This will almost certainly involve bespoke research of the kind that is routinely conducted by the Federal Communications Commission in its statutory quadrennial review of media ownership rules in the United States. It might involve, for example, commissioning qualitative research amongst different demographic, opinion-forming or policy-making groups to establish their main sources of new ideas or argumentation. Some kind of quantitative assessment could then be developed to establish what media sources have stimulated debate, ideas, or argument on specific issues. Such research can – and should – drill down much further than the traditionally superficial response of “TV” or “a blog” or “my newspaper”. **If Ofcom is serious about wanting to assess influence – as it must, in order to fulfil its own and the government’s definitional criteria of plurality – it must surely invest more time, thought and resources into assessing impact.**

### **Q11. Other relevant considerations**

As mentioned above, no account is taken of the power to set news agendas. That consumers say they get their news from television tells us little if television’s news agenda is set by the press (or indeed by any other levers of influence, such as PR companies). To complete an accurate picture, therefore, Ofcom needs to collect information on how news agendas are constructed and, once again, where the main media influencers lie. This, again, will require imagination, investment and time. Given the vital importance of these issues for democracy, it is imperative that Ofcom launches that process. It will not be possible to compile a meaningful or coherent picture of media plurality – or, more importantly, the threats to plurality – without it.

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<sup>1</sup> “Measuring media plurality: Ofcom’s advice to the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport”, Ofcom, June 2012, p8 (emphasis in original)

<http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/consultations/measuring-plurality/statement/statement.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p5

<sup>3</sup> Maggie Brown and Jason Deans, “Robert Peston: BBC follows the Daily Mail’s lead too much” in The Guardian, 5 June 2014. As chair of the session, I asked Peston the question on BBC news agenda-setting, expecting a rather more neutral reply! <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/jun/06/bbc-obsessed-agenda-daily-mail-robert-peston-charles-wheeler>

<sup>4</sup> Mark Sweney, “Sky News boss criticises press influence on television newsrooms” in The Guardian, 12 June 2014: <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/jun/12/sky-news-boss-criticises-influence-newspapers-daily-mail>

<sup>5</sup> Malcolm Dean, *Democracy Under Attack: How the media distort policy and politics*, The Policy Press, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Nick Davies, *Hack Attack: How the Truth Caught up with Rupert Murdoch*, Chatto & Windus, 2014, pp214-5.