

I'm responding to the consultation and will therefore focus on the questions raised in this support document on page 46: https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0012/220710/media-plurality-in-the-uk-condoc.pdf

However, I think in supporting the recommendation that the current regulation relating to media ownership and plurality should be retained, I think there needs to be a very clear understanding of what has happened to the print media over the last 20 years.

The commercial viability reach and impact, level and spread of readership have all diminished dramatically. The development of online access from traditional print-only publications has mitigated some of the damage to advertising revenue and readership penetration, but not by very much. Especially, where take up of online publications do not compensate for the drop in print take up and, therefore, the cross subsidy which would otherwise make the continuance of traditional formats viable.

The beneficiaries of this are, of course, those concentrating on, and making their money out of, social media platforms. Whilst the top slice from BBC revenues for local and regional journalism is very welcome, it is not only minimal but concentrates on the BBC's part, rather than that of other major global players. The Cairncross Review took substantial evidence that the recommendations were out of date by the time they were actually put into the public arena – there seems to be a complete reluctance to really get to grips with the current and future reality of where power lies in the dissemination of news, the impact on newsgathering and the diminution of plurality as serious, trained and professional journalism (and the moderating and professional editing process that goes with it) has been replaced by views masquerading as news, and false stories and downright lies starting to be accepted as "inevitable".

Here are my answers to the consultation questions:

1. On question one, I think that the ownership of the traditional media remains important but requires to be complemented by a very clear understanding of the power of other major platforms, and what actually constitutes "news" or serious journalism.
2. My comments above apply equally to your second question.
3. On question three, the concept of "news creator" begs the question as to how the "news" has been collected, collated, evaluated, and verified, as well as how it is edited and moderated. There seems to be an assumption that anything that is online should not be subject to the evaluation, and therefore the rules, which previously applied (albeit loosely) to the print media. We've moved on conceptually into a world where less rigour is expected - even to the point where the "inevitability" mentioned above applies to the new architecture in a way that effectively gives up the ghost. In other words, people are inclined to say, "well, it's impossible to do anything about this isn't it"? This inevitably plays directly into the hands of those who have no intention of investing in, or seeking to reflect, the values of professional newsgathering, the separation of that news from views, and an appreciation of what overseeing editorial content really means. By peddling the

notion that this is a new kind of "freedom", or that it is impossible for governments and their agencies to do anything about it, there is an inevitability about playing into the hands of those with global power and influence. The recent stand-off between the Australian government on Facebook is a very good example.

4. I'm supportive.
5. For the life of me, I find arguments in favour of lifting the restriction on advertising agencies, deeply unconvincing. The question that should always be asked is "why"?
6. The same rules (and, therefore, a clear playing field), should apply as it does to the BBC.
7. I can see no argument for allowing political parties or government (at whatever level) holding a license, to be changed. BBC local radio was initiated with substantial grants from many local authorities that this was not "funding" or, in any way, running the broadcast operation.
8. Any requirement in relation to plurality would make the retention of this restriction self-evident.
9. See comment above.
10. I agree

As indicated in the opening paragraphs of this note, the consultation concentrates on where we are now, rather than where we might be in the future. To that extent it does not address the really salient and pressing issues. I appreciate it is easier to raise these kind of questions and therefore to be able to collate the answers, but, actually, we have already moved into a very different era, and an account must be taken of this.

Above all, we must retain what we hold dear in this country in terms of public service broadcasting, and at least some semblance of a professional and - albeit superficially - accountable media. Those who would like us to move towards the US model do so, not on the grounds of quality, standards, or contribution to our public life and culture, but quite simply to make money.

The ability of very powerful forces to be able to "buy" an audience, and enfeebled regulation of their conduct, permits direct and subliminal interference with democratic and, therefore, political processes, in the interests not of plurality or of the engagement of the citizenry in democratic participation, but rather the ability to manipulate and subsequently to be able to control – and exploit.

Even those who are strong advocates of destroying what we hold dear in terms of public service ethics, know in their hearts that this is the case. They simply believe that exercising overarching influence and enrichment can be justified on the grounds that it creates society which will benefit "people like us", and as they believe that "people like us", have the ideas, the enterprise and, in the end, the correct interpretation of what constitutes the good society - they can square the circle in their head.

It is entirely down to us to avoid this being seen as a natural part of enabling a free market to operate in a way which we would never accept in terms of our broader health and well-being, education system or, for that matter, the operation of our policing and Armed Forces.

Yours sincerely,
David Blunkett