



A blueprint for a democratic media system

[Dan Hind](#), 12 July 2011

How would a democratic media system work in practice? Dan Hind draws on his latest book, [The Return of the Public](#), to argue for a recreation of our ecosystem of information, with the public commissioning of journalism at its heart.

In my article launching OurKingdom's [Power and Media page](#) I wrote that "[the media rarely feature in our debates about power. Their power to describe is matched by their power to evade description](#)". The unfolding revelations at News International have, for the moment, broken the silence that surrounds the relationship between the media and the political system. The reporting on the scandal has also cast light on the ways in which media companies engage with their advertisers, their readers, and with the wider, increasingly networked, public.

For the first time in a generation we have an opportunity to discuss how the media currently operate and what we need from them. Their vast constitutional significance can no longer be waved away as a matter for single-issue obsessives and ultra-leftists. The Prime Minister himself has been forced to acknowledge that "[we've all been in this together: the press, politicians, leaders of all parties, and yes, even me](#)". The power of the media, and its relationship with other forms of power, are now something that can be discussed in the media.

We are finally seeing concerns being broadcast about the concentration of media ownership, about the moral integrity of those who own large media enterprises, and about the existing instrument of press self-regulation, the Press Complaints Commission. Some change is now inevitable. News International's bid for BSkyB is, as I write, in the balance and it looks like the PCC will be replaced with something less obviously beholden to the newspaper industry.

But there is a danger that this moment will pass without a proper reckoning with the media system we have. Worse, we will fail to describe the system we want. Persuasive voices will soon be calling for a truce of sorts. After all, they will say, the criminality spread far beyond the now shuttered *News of the World*, far beyond News International. Public confidence in the police is being undermined. By all means limit Murdoch's power a little, send one or two wrongdoers to jail even. But let's not overdo things. We

have a vibrant and unruly newspaper industry and a dignified broadcasting sector. The very fact of the scandal proves that the system works.

Such a response would amount to a cover-up far worse than anything we have seen so far.

The existing mix of public service and private sector media have repeatedly failed to keep the national audience informed of matters of pressing common concern. Neither market forces nor the BBC's fabled doctrine of balance prevented the British government from misleading its own people and launching an illegal war of aggression in 2003. For decades the media have colluded with politicians to present the public with a deeply misleading picture of economic and social reality. We now know the price of this collusion. Since 2007 the Bank of England has lent £1400 *billion* to privately owned banks to rescue them from their own recklessness – recklessness that the media at the time assured us was essential to the prosperity of UK Plc. As we survey the current mess there is plenty of blame to go round. But those who insisted that the media were functioning adequately, if perhaps too confrontationally, must take their full share. Though individual journalists and publications performed well, the story as a whole is one of miserable failure.

If neither market forces nor the public service ethos can be trusted to keep us adequately informed it follows that some other mechanism must be tried. In my recent book, [*The Return of the Public*](#), I outlined one approach to media reform that holds out some hope of bringing significant change to the sum of things available for public deliberation. I argue that each of us must be given some control over what is investigated and researched and over the prominence given to the results. The power to commission investigation and the power to publicise what is discovered are currently in the hands of a tiny number of professional editors and owners. These powers can no longer be monopolised by individuals who are unrepresentative, unaccountable to the public, and vulnerable to all manner of private pressure and inducement.

We need to set aside a sum of public money sufficient to support a large and lively culture of investigative reporting and analysis. Journalists and researchers can make open pitches for the money they need to conduct particular investigations or to pursue long-term projects. Those that receive sufficient support from the public will receive the money. Those that produce material that seems important to a fair number of people will be given more resources with which to broadcast their findings to a wider public.

Such a system could be run using the infrastructure of the BBC. Departments in the English regions and the devolved nations would each hold a sum of money in trust and disperse it in line with the expressed wishes of democratic publics. A clear democratic mandate would replace the focus group and the whim of the editor as the driving force in decisions about what reaches the agenda of the mainstream media.

A tiny fraction of the licence fee, 3% say, would provide £100 million every year. This would be enough to pay more than 4000 journalists and researchers a salary of £24,000. At the moment there are fewer than 150 investigative journalists working in Britain.

Imagine what 4000 journalists and researchers, beholden only to the voting public, could achieve. Forensic accountants and advocacy groups could pitch for funds. The campaign against offshore finance could marshal the resources needed to put a stop to tax evasion and avoidance. Development NGOs could publicise policies to bring people out of poverty that stand some chance of working. The debate about political economy would no longer be cluttered with the wishful thinking and myth-making of the old, exhausted intellectual consensus. All manner of abuses that currently go unchallenged could be brought into the light of general awareness.

Such a system would be open to abuse. It would be unruly and untidy. It would allow a certain amount of nonsense its moment in the sun. But there is already a great deal of nonsense in the *Sun*. Why should we tolerate the eccentricities of a plutocrat and panic at the thought of popular enthusiasms and concerns becoming public matters? Besides, though we love our pet theories, we love the truth more. The best cure for popular delusions is the public test of an open system of media production.

The balanced good sense of the professional editor is all too often the unacknowledged triumph of special interests. After all, everyone on the inside knew that only cranks worried about the expansion of credit until it turned out that the cranks weren't cranks exactly. Everyone knew that offshore finance was of no interest to the public until the public finally started occupying shops on the high street. Those on the inside can no longer be left with a monopoly to decide what constitutes a fit object of curiosity.

We have all been in this together, Cameron is right. But many of us had only the vaguest sense that something was amiss. Who, after all, would tell us that the media were failing in their self-appointed task to keep us informed? The media?

Tocqueville once remarked that, in a democracy, public opinion is sovereign. But public opinion is not currently the product of an open process of inquiry and debate. To an extent we can only guess at it is the achievement of private actors. It is high time we made public opinion a public matter. The reforms I propose in [*The Return of the Public*](#) are my best approximation of how we might do that.

If we miss this moment, we will have only ourselves to blame.