



Comment on News Corp UK and Ireland Limited request to accept undertakings

1 message



10 February 2019 at 19:52

Please find my comments as follows. These are sent on an anonymous basis, but may be published as you see fit.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this proposal. As a journalist who has worked for one of the newspapers for the last 10 years I hope I can offer a little insight into the matters you ask us to address.

News UK's submission states that: "An important means of reducing titles' cost bases, without comprising their quality, has been for publishers to bring about greater integration between the Monday to Saturday and Sunday editions for their papers; thereby eliminating substantial duplication of costs."

I would be confident that a properly conducted poll of the journalists involved in the integration of Monday to Saturday and Sunday editions at other UK titles would refute the claim that past integrations have been achieved "without compromising their quality".

The standard pattern of amalgamating titles at other newspaper companies has been to reduce the head count of reporters and writers and increase their workload. This has come during a period in which a typical reporter's responsibilities and output has expanded beyond newsprint editions to rolling online copy, video and audio work. Reduced headcount coupled with increased output delivers an inevitable outcome – less time to do in-depth, important journalism, more errors, and – key to the matter at hand – less accurate presentation of the news.

It should also be noted that a reduced head count of journalists also reduces media plurality and the range of well-informed opinion expressed.

Allowing News UK to integrate The Times and The Sunday Times in the manner proposed can be fully expected to significantly increase the demands on an already stretched reporting staff. To give an example from the Sports section of The Sunday Times, a paper that has long sold itself on the quality of its sports coverage has been operating for a number of years with just one member of staff who is a dedicated football writer.

This section has moved to a model of utilising freelance reporters to compensate for the reduction in staff. Payments to freelancers have been squeezed to achieve further economies, with some remittances being reduced by over 60% in real terms over the last decade. It is not hard to envisage that further cost cutting will ensure post-integration – an obvious management strategy would be to add to the workload of Times staff by instructing them to take on duties currently held by freelancers for zero additional remuneration. Again, issues of quality, accurate presentation of news, free expression of opinion and plurality are clear.

(In this area the two titles have already gone some way down the path to integration by sharing reporters at major sports events such as the Olympics, the last two World Cups, and the European Championship.)

Amalgamating the titles will result in significant employee redundancies at all levels of both organisations. Rather than maintaining the quality of the newspapers' coverage, the aim of the proposed changes to the holding company's undertakings appears designed to improve the balance sheets of the publications ahead of a future sale.



