

Paying for journalism

Some MPs in the UK have rushed in to side with the Australian government and Parliament in their row with Facebook. The Australian government is proposing a law to make platforms like Facebook pay to use extracts from newspapers and media reports on their sites, so the journalism involved will not go unrewarded. Facebook has countered by saying they in effect give the papers and media free adverts by posting some of their material with full credits. The journalists get access to a much bigger audience which in turn boosts their commercial value. Facebook decided that the best way to comply with the prospective law is to ban all journalism extracts from established media outlets from its sites so it need not make any payments. This tiff provides a good opportunity to review the current state of journalism and how we pay for things here in the UK. I do not propose to weigh into the Australian debate, which their Parliament is best able to conduct for itself.

Let me declare my prejudices. I am a fan of good journalism. A well researched and informative article helps my education. Lively and informed opinion pieces contribute to the national conversation, vital in a democracy. Well written and amusing pieces are entertaining, a welcome diversion for time off. Many pay for some of this by buying papers and electronic subscriptions, by paying the BBC Licence fee, by their employer taking out collective subscriptions for services needed for work, and by accepting adverts alongside journalism to enable them to enjoy some free services. Each of these paying models has its advantages and disadvantages.

My concern with the current UK media relates to editorial choices and use of journalistic talent. I am particularly critical of the BBC because I have to pay for it whether I want to use it or not. It regularly fails to live up to the ideals of its Charter. As one who used to listen to a lot of Radio 4 news and watch one of the main evening tv news programmes every night, I often find myself turning off, faced with the same diet of highly selective topics and systematic bias of worldview. For much of the last year the two story lines of pandemic and global warming have dominated most news broadcasts. It is often not a case of "news", but recycling "olds". It is often not hard news but regurgitated opinion or forecasts, not reported events and government statements but opinion surveys and lobby group reports inspired to prove a viewpoint. In order to be better informed I turn direct to the sources of the news and read the statements, draft laws, budgets and the rest for myself, as it is a rare day that you get much factual content or informed comment on the important decisions and events that unfold.

Armed with the facts and statements of those making the news I often find I am in a very different conversation from the trivia, ideological repetitions or exaggerations of the main broadcasts. The BBC makes use of highly selected experts, many of whom seem to share a clear one sided political viewpoint about the importance of powerful global government as the answer to their view of what the problems are. Some of them do not seem to have read the detailed documents that underpin the issue. On economic matters I find they usually misrepresent the position by drawing on some highly spun

interpretations and not using the actual figures. They normally ignore important statistical releases, as with the state debt where they do not usually distinguish between net and gross allowing for Bank of England ownership of debts. They rarely report cash figures for public spending and spending increases . They are not interested in public sector productivity issues. They accepted the Labour "austerity" analysis of the previous decade without revealing that over that decade there was a very large rise in tax revenue, a rise in cash public spending and even a very small increase in real public spending, contrary to the generally stated cuts in spending and a failure to increase taxes enough. They regularly ignore the preoccupations of voters with issues like illegal migration, politically correct language, restrictions on freedoms , controls on our freedoms and high taxes on enterprise.They usually dislike or ignore England.