

## “I can't imagine a radically reformed political economy that isn't built on a radically reformed public sphere.” An interview with Dan Hind, advocate of media reform.

Sašo Slaček Brlek\*; Dan Hind.

\* *Social Communication Research Centre, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, saso.brlek-slacek@fdv.uni-lj.si*

**Abstract:** Interview with Dan Hind, advocate for media reform. We discuss the need to democratise journalism, his proposal to achieve this goal by giving the public direct control over the allocation of public subsidies in the form of public commissioning, possible objections and hurdles in the way of implementing it and his views on the pilot project of public commissioning by the Croatian Ministry of Culture.

**Keywords:** Media reform; Public Commissioning; Journalism Subsidies; Public sphere; Journalism.

Dan Hind worked in publishing from 1998 to 2009, during which time he focused on current affairs and contemporary history. In 2009 he left his job at Random House to write *The Return of the Public* (Verso 2010), a book about the politics of the media and the potential for radical reform. In it he proposes that public subsidies for journalism be distributed according to the model of public commissioning in which citizens would be given the power vote on the distribution of public funds for supporting journalism. He writes an occasional column for Al Jazeera and continues to argue for democratic media in his own country and overseas. In 2013 his proposals formed the basis of a journalism pilot run by the Croatian Ministry of Culture.



(Photo: Sašo Slaček Brlek)

We spoke in Ljubljana on April 10, 2014, when Dan Hind was a speaker at the roundtable *Crisis and rebirth of Journalism*<sup>1</sup>, organised by the Slovenian Communication Association and the Institute for Labour Studies, and gave a public talk media reform<sup>2</sup> as part of a series of public talks organised by the Institute for Labour Studies.

**Sašo:** The idea of public commissioning is not well known. Perhaps you could start by explaining what we are talking about.

**Dan:** Sure. The very simple definition is that funds that are intended to support journalism in the public interest should be substantially controlled and directed by the same public who will ultimately depend on the journalistic product. As you know at the current time we have a kind of coalition of professional and owner groups who determine the news agenda in an essentially invisible process. It is secluded from public scrutiny and it stands in very marked contrast to the journalistic instinct to make everything public. The means by which they make things public are kept substantially obscure. The reasoning behind it is that we don't really have a clear way of establishing what the public is interested in at any given point in time and what it would be in the public's interest to be interested in. And public commissioning makes the news agenda much more unpredictable, makes the nature of the public much more difficult to predict. In a system like this it is not clear how people would organise - whether they would organise on class a basis, on a geographical basis, on the basis of age, shared lifestyle, gender, ethnicity and so on. It allows the public as an entity to form itself in as many ways as it wishes to. It gets away from the idea of a superior organising intelligence of some kind that determines how the news agenda should be formed. It also gets away from the idea that we sometimes have on the left that we know what is best for the public and they need to be enlightened by our superior understanding. If our ideas prosper in these conditions then they become part of a much wider common sense. If they don't then maybe we need to think again.

The process of enlightenment becomes something that is self-governing and unpredictable and therefore much more likely, it seems to me, to make meaningful connections with other radical progressive projects. If you think about the sites where deep structural, even revolutionary reform is necessary, these are areas which are substantially misunderstood or that are substantially invisible to the public. Only by making them both visible and objects of general deliberation do we have a hope of really attacking things like the structure of the financial system and the monetary system with which it is intertwined. Obviously a pressing concern throughout Europe is how to make the financial system obedient to social needs. Until the public has some means to discuss finance outside the terms that are set by political and financial elites serious proposals for reform are not going to emerge. It needs emphasising that serious reform will weaken political and financial elites and so will be resisted by them.

**Sašo:** This idea of media reform is obviously a part of a larger idea of reform of society.

---

<sup>1</sup> See: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYMTz\\_c-pNc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYMTz_c-pNc) (10. 3. 2017).

<sup>2</sup> See: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=7seHPXVT3MA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7seHPXVT3MA) (10. 3. 2017).

**Dan:** Yes. It is a very modest; it is a very minor tweak in the way that we distribute subsidies for journalism. It does not pose any overwhelming technical difficulties, particularly with new digital technologies. There are practical details that would have to be decided place by place. On one level it is a minor change to a particular part of the administration. But of course what it does is that it opens up a point at which you can begin to lever out much more far-reaching change.

If you imagine at the moment that the social and economic settlement is a sheer face. By digging out this crack of public participation in the creation of the public sphere you create an opportunity to then open up that fissure wider in a gradual process. A gradual process that might be quite quick ... but step by step you could see how people could start to get a better understanding of their conditions and start to formulate a shared understanding of what needs to be done.

So on the one hand I want to be very modest about what I am proposing. It is not difficult, it is not on any grand scale, but it applies pressure, it seems to me, at exactly the right point to begin to give energy and momentum to a whole range of progressive projects. Progressive projects that we can really at the moment imagine in outline, because they are projects that depend upon the active engagement of large numbers of people in the process of understanding, in the process of figuring things out for themselves. A financial system that is widely understood is a different financial system from one which is largely misunderstood or not known at all, not an object of thought. So even what we have, even the institutional arrangements we have will be transformed by a different mode of securing publicity.

So there is an ambition there to expand and transform citizenship and therefore to change the nature of the state and to bring under general comprehension those things which currently are shrouded in mystery. And they are shrouded in mystery for a very good reason, it seems to me; they are basically indefensible. You simply cannot make a reasonable defence of a financial system which is on the one hand able to secure massive private profits but on the other hand is in effect an arm of the state and enjoys a whole range of public guarantees and immunities. It is an indefensible mix of power and irresponsibility, which only survives for as long as it is not registered or as long as it is only a source of vague anxiety or dissatisfaction.

**Sašo:** Now this idea might seem very modest but at the same time I think it goes against the grain of both contemporary ideology and political practice. What we are witnessing is after all a trend towards important decisions being removed ever farther from the eyes of the public. And on the ideological level we are faced with the neoliberal idea that people decide on the marketplace, that they are voting with their money on what gets produced, and you will get basically the same result if you give them the vote. On the other hand, even sympathetic voices might argue that there are power structures around the current media system that have resources to communicate and to persuade and they will use those resources in a system of public commissioning to get the results they want. How would you answer such critiques?

**Dan:** To take the last one first, which I think is the most persuasive one: it is certainly true that those who are currently favoured in the system, those who are well organised in the current conjuncture are best placed to benefit from a system of public commissioning, at least at first. But what they produce will still be subject to public test. Let's say that those who want to protect the current system can control 99% of the expenditure. The 1% of expenditure on critical material will reach a general audience. If those who really want change are careful and self-critical about what they are

doing then they will be able to shift the terms of debate quite quickly. Imagine if 1% of mainstream news was coming from a genuinely critical perspective and the public could increase that amount over time.

Again, to use the analogy of a crack in the smooth surface of media-political communications, it may be that most of what is produced is a kind of concrete that covers up the fissure. But some of it won't be. The groups at the moment which are developing a revolutionary, reformist, progressive critique - however you describe it, but one which challenges the status quo at the moment - they are sufficiently organised to achieve some measure of publicity in a system like this. And if what they produce is superior in the sense that it is better able to take into account the relevant facts of any given situation then it will, I believe, begin to win public approval and support. The current arrangements need a constant effort of confabulation; they rely on claims that are simply and demonstrably untrue.

So I think we need to distinguish between what will happen in the first month or the first year of a system like this and what will happen over a longer period of time as the forms of description which currently predominate become subject to critical interrogation in fora that matter - because they are fora that are exposed to broad publics - and are found wanting. I think that the public sphere that we have is inadequate. It doesn't work and I think that if people were able to see the assumptions and the claims on which the status quo rests at the moment and interrogate it in a form that they couldn't really evade substantive debate, then the public sphere would be transformed. The descriptions that we have will be replaced with better ones. As I say, that is a gradual process, it is a process that happens over time and it is a process that won't be entirely to anyone's liking. No one is going to be satisfied with what the public sphere is at any given moment. There will always be things to argue about, always things to disagree about, but public debate will progressively get closer to reality, because ... well, fundamentally I am of the belief that people prefer truth to lies. Now, they may take refuge in lies, they may find lies consoling, they may build their identity around a lie in some instances, but in the end people prefer the truth. People prefer the truth because the truth makes them free and people want to be free.

That brings us to the other question; I mean the more straightforwardly elitist question: well, won't this just simply reproduce popular tastes? I think there is a useful analogy which can be made with food. If you present someone who is hungry with the choice between some junk food and some ingredients, they may well eat the junk food, because they are hungry. If you say to them: do you want to plan your meal tonight, do you want junk food or do you want to cook some food, then they may well make more healthy food and may make a better meal for themselves, because they are not hungry, they are not in that immediate sense of "I need something to eat" or "I need to know what's going on" or "I need some entertainment" or "I need something that is there". Yes, it's true that people have an appetite for celebrity and gossip and things like that and I don't think that will go away, just as you won't suddenly see the end of McDonald's or fast food joints. That is something that people sometimes want to eat. But it's an unacceptable leap from that to saying that all we want is junk all the time and that our appetite for junk is stable, that it won't be in any way affected by the kinds of decisions we can make that are forward-looking. I might switch on the radio when I want to know what is happening today, but I might have very different preoccupations if someone said to me: "Well, what do you want to know about in three months' time? What do you want to know about in the future?" Those are two very different things. And I think giving people the power to shape the public sphere will in time change the way they relate to the public sphere. They won't want to see an end-

less reproduction of the existing agenda. I remember that I was talking about this to some English academics and one of them was horrified and said: "They'll just want stories about Rihanna." A sort of reflex that burst out. And it is a very common idea that other people are stupid and slaves to fashion or slaves to sensation. But the market already provides that. Why would anyone take the opportunity to get more of that? It's not like it's going to go away. You are much more likely to see people using an opportunity like this to find out new things.

Does that ... oh yeah, the neoliberal thing! It does fly in the face of neoliberal governance, yes, that's kind of the point. What I would say about the daylight neoliberal argument is that the problem with democracy is that it is majoritarian, that it lends itself to a sort of mob rule. And we have to take important decisions like monetary policy away from the unruly public, who are slaves to their passions and are fools and so on, easily lead, and we have to put it in a sequestered space, where experts can make decisions for the public good and that's something that you see in central bank structures, most notably you see it in Brussels. The European project is about saying: "The public is a problem; we can get much more done if we are secluded from them and are able to operate in a technocratic fashion, because of the dangers of populism, because of the dangers of majoritarian tyranny and so on." Well, I am not arguing for majoritarian tyranny. I am not even arguing for a majoritarian public sphere. Quite the contrary, I am arguing for a massively pluralist public sphere, where in theory every individual could start developing their own account of a social reality. The results of public commissioning would not be in any way some sort of political mandate. It would be the basis on which you make further political decisions, hopefully on the basis of better information. So the neoliberals, to the extent that they are sincere, have nothing to fear from public commissioning. There is nothing wrong with it, right? It's just something that they can learn to live with. Of course, they might not be entirely sincere. This is one of the interesting topics that public commissioning could explore.

**Sašo:** I believe the comparison with another model for media reform invites itself. Robert McChesney has also been advocating for media reform and his proposal of a voucher system has managed to mobilise quite a strong movement in the US. How does your proposal differ from his and why do you think we need this kind of reform and not the one McChesney is proposing?

**Dan:** Well firstly, I would be very happy to see McChesney's model adopted. It's much, much better than what we have now. The difference between where he and I start may be that I come from a country with quite a strong unitary state broadcaster and America has a tradition of weaker state broadcasting, although, as McChesney has shown, their commercial near monopolies, the big TV networks, function as something like an arm of the state in some ways.

It's important to more than strengthen alternative publications, which I think a voucher system would do; undoubtedly it would channel more money towards journalistic projects which are outside the mainstream, and that would be very welcome. But I'm eager that we develop a media system where the mainstream itself - that is to say what we think of now as the broadcast system, but which will be digitised over time - the main avenues of information and analysis - become sensitive to public decision-making, decision-making by organising publics.

What I propose would benefit non-mainstream publications, but it would also have the potential to create more institutions, to empower individual journalists, groups of

journalists, who aren't necessarily at the outset organised as publishing operations. It wouldn't give more money to editors to then make their own decisions in the same sort of professional seclusion that they enjoy now. Rather, it would open up editorial decision-making to the public in a more direct way and the public would be able to assess the use made of public money more easily.

Implicit in public commissioning is the notion that not only is information-gathering to be funded democratically but that some mechanism exists whereby information that is gathered and is deemed interesting can be pushed into the mainstream by another round of public decision-making.

Because in the end it would be nice if the progressive media were stronger and had more money, it would have important knock-on effects, but what is crucial, it seems to me, is that new kinds of information, new ways of conceiving of the social become available to people who wouldn't pick up a copy of the *Nation*, or watch *Democracy Now!*, or whatever, who don't engage with these progressive media, because they've got busy lives, they work hard, they've got families to raise, and actually their opportunities to engage with information are quite constrained. Most of us have time pressures and so the contents of the nightly news bulletin, and increasingly the news stories that feature prominently on Facebook feeds, that will set the terms of political debate. But you know, as I say, what I am proposing would certainly strengthen the sector that he wants to strengthen.

His proposal is much neater. It's much more difficult in a way to pick holes in it, because there's a certain kind of entity that would be eligible for funding, whereas I'm making a proposal for a much more open-ended system; all citizens would all be in a position to seek funding for their projects. Lots of people who don't have a business.

**Sašo:** The BBC is often thought of as a model of public service broadcasting, but on the other hand there are critiques, I am thinking for example about Stuart Hall, who has been pointing out the class and racial bias of the BBC. Even studies that were commissioned by the BBC itself showed that there is an overwhelming reliance on official sources to the detriment of alternative voices. What is the attitude towards this model institution in the UK and is there a possibility to introduce something new, something more democratic through critique.

**Dan:** Well, the reason BBC has the form and is as large an operation as it is in terms of its budget is that it plays a very important role in maintaining the status quo. It is a conservative institution in the very broad sense. Part of its great strength, it seems to me, is that it manages to enlist progressive and even radical opinion in its defence. Because the idea is that if we question the BBC, if we criticise the BBC, we somehow give comfort to its sabre-tooth enemies in the private media sector.

In terms of the general attitude I think the News International scandal has slightly lifted the taboo or the prohibitions on criticising the BBC. The BBC is coming up for a charter renewal in 2017, which will be a point of some debate about what the BBC is for and how it might be structured. The BBC wants to have an argument, where it embodies public service values and resists the encroachment of market values. I would like to have an argument between the BBC as an imperial institution that keeps the natives happy and the possibility that the BBC is a democratic institution, which allows the people who live in England and Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom to discover what is going on collectively and to decide what to do about it.

It is a well-resourced public service broadcaster; it has enormous amounts of intellect and talent within it. I respect many of the individuals who work for the BBC, but I

think at the moment its governing structure means that it operates as a defence of the established order. The established order doesn't work and needs to be changed and so I would argue that part of that change would have to encompass the structure of the BBC.

**Sašo:** At this moment we are going through a period of fundamental change in the way social communication and the flows of information work. Ad supported media are in crisis, they have problems monetising their audience, journalists are faced with mass layoffs and precarisation of working conditions, with the transfer to digital we are witnessing fragmentation of audiences, also rising reliance on the labour of audiences and so on. What does this mean for the fight for media reform? Would you say it opens up an opportunity or is it rather more of a threat now that a lot of media organisations are struggling to survive and are trying to cut costs, to find new ways to commercialise their content and their audiences?

**Dan:** I think it's a very mixed picture. Journalistic operations that are successful in the current climate - and by successful I mean prestigious more than profitable, because there are "successful" journalistic projects, which are losing a lot of money at the moment - but these successful institutions will fight very hard, I think, to retain their editorial initiative, to keep editorial decision-making away from the eventual consumers. This is the power and the mystique of the editor. Part of what I want to expose to the daylight is the kind of decision-making that goes on in editorial meetings. As long as they've still got the lights on I think the major media are going to be very, very resistant to this kind of approach, because it essentially demystifies them. It takes away their power. What newspapers don't publish is at least as important as what they do publish.

The rising precariousness in the industry does mean, I think, that young people are leaving university, wanting to get jobs in the media, and realising that then they're going to have to work for free or they're going to have to freelance in very precarious conditions to even scrape a living at all. So at that point, it seems to me, the question does arise: well, we do think journalism is a public good and we do spend money on journalism, so why is so little of it finding its way to journalists? So I think that journalists starting out and journalists mid-career as well, who realise that they're not as protected as they thought they were, will gradually become more sympathetic to these kinds of ideas because it funds them to do what they want to do in journalism. And if it means that they have a different boss, the public rather than the boss that is their superior in a hierarchical organisation, then so be it. A boss is a boss.

But, like I say, it's a mixed picture. I don't see the established media reacting to the crisis they're in by saying: "All right, how do we open this process up to our readers, to our viewers?" They're very reluctant to have that conversation, very reluctant to entertain that possibility. It is not what they got into journalism to do.

**Sašo:** Well, some are claiming that this is happening with web 2.0, user comments and so on.

**Dan:** Yeah. I think that is interesting in that it is participation of a kind that they're comfortable with. And it is participation of a kind that is not very effective. It doesn't work because it is governed really by the need that they feel to keep control. You don't want to make comments after an article is published; you want to make comments before it is researched. Lots of people have lots of interesting things to say,

but most of the time what you see under articles are just expressions of irritation. I mean, they're not very interesting.

The web is a whole other area, isn't it, in that it is one which has profited vastly from a rhetoric of the voluntary, the idea that we can all do this just in our own time and we don't need to be paid. We can produce all this content and isn't it fantastic. And there's been an enormous explosion, as it were, of free labour online. I don't think it's any kind of basis on which to try and develop a functioning public sphere. Of course as citizens we have important information and of course we will benefit, I think, from things like Twitter that allow us, as it were, to be micro-publishers. Lots of people are using these technologies in interesting and thoughtful ways. But if you want to do this kind of thing well, then in the end you need money. You need money to pay for your broadband, you need money to pay for food, you need money to buy the time that you need to become better informed about things.

So there is going to be a division of labour in the way that we produce and consume socially relevant information and that's fine. The key question is: who's the boss. Who's in charge? Who gets to say yes or no? And who gets to say whether something is worth pursuing further? At the moment a tiny number of people have that power and they have their own preoccupations, some of which they're conscious of, but many of them they're simply not aware of. There were some statistics on the number of times that economic inequality was mentioned in the US media or the US broadcast media between 2000 and 2007. And I think it was like a half a dozen times in the entirety of that coverage that it was even noticed, because the people who were producing that news agenda were incredibly well insulated against the rising inequality around them. I don't think they were consciously censoring this information. Often they wouldn't have been. It just wouldn't have occurred to them that it was a problem. We know that there is an enormous class bias in these kinds of institutions, particularly to the extent that they're successful.

**Sašo:** What is your plan to get these ideas, these plans for reform into practice?

**Dan:** There's very little I can do as an individual. All I can do is note and try and publicise the efforts that people are making to bring the media under some sort of democratic regime. I've written down what I think and I've explained my reasoning as best I can and that's there. I mean it's the best summation that I was capable of making at the time. It's really now I think for people who are involved in real struggles, in the real political space, to decide whether this idea is useful to their immediate objectives. And more importantly: is it going to contribute to the kind of world they want to see. I can't imagine a radically reformed political economy that isn't built on a radically reformed public sphere, that isn't built on a radically different set of generally accepted descriptions. It seems to me that it is prior to any kind of hope we might have for a reasonably orderly transition to an economy that is reasonably just, reasonably sustainable and not as obviously pathological as the one we have now. But as I say, what I can practically do now, the most I can do now really is to publicise the efforts that people are making to try and make this a reality.

**Sašo:** In Croatia a pilot project of public commissioning has been successfully implemented. We talked about it yesterday on the roundtable. How do you judge that experiment?

Doing anything for the first time is always incredibly difficult and my overwhelming relief is that it has happened. And it has happened in a way that was well organised, that was sensible, and that has had some useful outcomes. It's clear that the public were interested in commissioning things that were not being well covered in the mainstream. It took place on a relatively small scale, but it shows that a lot of the, as it were, a priori critiques are baseless. They are without foundation. People are interested about learning about new things and they will give their support to projects that promise to tell them things they didn't know about, about under-described aspects of reality. My hope is that it's the first of many experiments and that each one will learn from the ones before and that gradually this will cease to be an exotic idea. It will become boring common sense and people will wonder why there was such resistance to it.

But it seems to me to be a perfectly unobjectionable idea, so we should just carry on doing it. And that means that we have to be ambitious; we have to get control of public funds and make them available to the public, so that citizens can fund the kinds of journalism they feel they need.