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Rupert Murdoch: A Populist Emperor of the Fourth Estate



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Rupert Murdoch: A Populist Emperor of the Fourth Estate

BY BULENT KENES

ABSTRACT

Rupert Murdoch is probably the most controversial media figure in the world. His career, journalism, and political involvements have been a frequent source of controversy. There are a number of book-length biographies about Murdoch and his role as the world's most influential and populist media mogul.

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INTRODUCTION

Both his enemies and friends paint him as an almost supernatural figure. In their eyes, he is “the Supreme Satan” or “Dracula” or the “Prince of Darkness” (Cooke, 2018); others call him the “media’s demon king” (Arsenault & Castells, 2008) or “a Sun King” (Neil, 1996); to some he is simply “an arrogant cancer” (Kwai, 2020). Rupert Murdoch stands out as the archetypal media mogul. He has been heralded as the living embodiment of Charles Foster Kane and “the global village’s de facto communications minister” (Farhi, 1997; Low, 1998).

Political pundits, politicians, and anti-conglomeration activists present Murdoch’s Goliath-like status as paradigmatic (Arsenault & Castells, 2008). Characterized as a relentless and formidable businessman by many of his biographers (Chenoweth, 2001; Dover, 2008; Page, 2003; Shawcross, 1993), Murdoch is probably the most controversial media proprietor in the world. His career, journalism, and political involvements have been a frequent source of controversy. There are a number of book-length biographies about Murdoch as the world’s most influential and populist media mogul. He is also the central figure in several other books concentrated on his business dealings, his politics, or his involvement in scandals.

Murdoch has instituted what The Nation dubbed the “four S” model of journalism – “scare headlines, sex, scandal, and sensation” – across nearly every major acquisition that he has made over his career (Pasadeos and Renfro, 1997: 33). The Economist labels Murdoch the “inventor of the modern tabloid” (The Economist, 2011), and it’s true he developed and followed a pattern for his newspapers – namely by increasing the coverage of sports, sex, and scandal, leading to sensationalist, eye-catching headlines. For many, Murdoch’s success has resulted in the dumbing-down of the media, with quality entertainment and journalism replaced by mindless vulgarity (Walker, 2002). Murdoch’s tenure has been marked by an exception disregard for social graces. “I’m quite ashamed,” he said. “I enjoy popular journalism. I must say I enjoy it more than what you would call quality journalism.” But he was never really ashamed at all (Cooke, 2018).

As a controversial figure, Murdoch’s initial success was built on his achievements as a newspaper publisher. His newspapers have also been among the most controversial. The controversies initially arose when his tabloid papers pushed the boundaries of public and professional acceptability; soon, the controversies surrounded his papers becoming vehicles for promoting his favoured political candidates – specifically, right-wing populists (McK-night, 2010).

Rupert Murdoch was born on March 11, 1931, the second of four children and the only son of Keith (b. 1885) and Elisabeth (b. 1909). While Keith died at sixty-seven, Elisabeth lived to be 103, dying in 2012. Keith gained fame by evading military censors to report on the slaughter of his countrymen during the British-led Gallipoli campaign of World War I. He leveraged that fame to become a powerful executive at the Melbourne Herald and Weekly Times news company, a position that he in turn used to punish his enemies and reward his allies (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019a). Soon he built up a network of Australian media holdings, acquiring several existing tabloids publications in take-over bids (Serle, 1986). Over the next two decades he bought shares in existing media operations and was chair and manager of the Telegraph and Herald (Moores, 2005, p57).

Keith Murdoch amalgamated many existing media companies to form publications such as the Courier-Mail and subsequently monopolised the local press in several regions (Scottney-Turbill, 2012). But he never built a true media empire. Keith did own two regional newspapers, one of which had to be sold to pay off his death duties when he died suddenly in 1952. That left only the 75,000-circulation News of Adelaide for his 21-year-old son. But Rupert Murdoch had already received something much more “valuable” from his father: an extended tutorial in how to use media holdings to extract favours from politicians (Mahler,

& Rutenberg, 2019a).

Rupert studied Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at Worcester College, Oxford, in England. He kept a bust of Lenin in his rooms and came to be known as “Red Rupe.” Such tales are supposed to show the extremity of his evolution: from undergraduate Marxist in the Labour Club to a union-breaker and Thatcherite-in-chief (Cooke, 2018). Although he never seemed to hold a coherent set of political beliefs in his worldview, Murdoch’s early inclinations were to identify with the underdog and to be anti-establishment.

Rupert’s first order of business after he gained control of his father’s media operations was to establish a proper Murdoch-owned empire in Australia. After buying additional local papers, he founded the country’s first national general-interest newspaper, *The Australian*, which gave him a powerful platform that he used to help elect governments that eased national regulations designed to limit the size of media companies. He would eventually take control of nearly two-thirds of the national newspaper market (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019a).

Murdoch has built his empire in many stages. He became a national figure in Australian newspapers in the 1960s. During the 1970s, his News Limited grew to encompass many international holdings. In the early 70s, he published sensation London tabloids; in 1973 Murdoch made a successful bid to purchase three Texas publications (Funding Universe, 2011, p1). This was followed by the acquisition of *The New York Post* three years later (Marijorbanks, 2000, p3). This not only marked News Limited’s entry into the American market, but also highlighted Murdoch’s growing interest in the US and in international expansion. Murdoch had his sights set on the creation of a global empire (Winseck, 2008, p1-5).

News Corporation (NewsCorp), the organisation at the head of the Murdoch Empire, was established in 1979 as holding company for the investments of News Limited and its international subsidiaries (Funding Universe, 2006, p1). Through News Limited, News Corporation, and other holdings, Murdoch has taken his cross-media ventures into commercial and pay-tv markets, also acquiring a long list of commercial business enterprises (Harding-Smith, 2011, p1-14; Funding Universe, 2006, p2). His purchase of the *Times* and *Sunday Times* in the UK happened in the early 1980s. His entry into US television and film also took place in the 1980s, and his solidified his unprecedented dominance of Australian newspapers in the late 80s. In the 1990s, he expanded to satellite TV, especially in Asia and Britain.

In 1993, he purchased Star TV, a pan-Asian television service based in Hong Kong, as part of his plan to build a global television network (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020). Thussu (2007) argues that Star’s entry into the Indian television market engendered a “Murdochization” of news that transformed the country’s media industry (Arsenault & Castells, 2008). The network has steadily grown in terms of viewing numbers. Its success, based on brazen right-wing propaganda, may encourage Star News to pursue an even more pronounced populist news agenda in the future (Thussu, 2007).

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Murdoch developed ties to politicians across the globe so that they would support him, even as he supported them. Elected officials have known that their rise or fall is in part dependent on him. Efforts to understand Murdoch’s media universe are often compared to Kremlinology.

Murdoch founded Fox News in 1996, and he acquired Dow Jones and Company (The Wall Street Journal) in 2010. Each of these developments was attended by controversy and conflict. His cross-media ownership has extended into numerous geographical areas, including the aforementioned India and numerous South Pacific regions (Winseck, 2008, p1-5). This has placed Murdoch and his media in a position of great influence and control. The three main countries he plays a significant role in are Australia, the UK, and the US. In these democracies, presidents and prime ministers come and go, but Murdoch remains (Grynbaum, 2020). His power has been more lasting than any political power: during his career, he has enjoyed access to nine US presidents, nine British prime ministers, and nine Australian prime ministers (Cooke, 2018).

Murdoch's pan-Asian network Star (Satellite Television Asian Region) has transformed TV news and entertainment in India, as elsewhere in Asia. By 2005, Star was broadcasting "over 50 television services in seven languages to more than 300 million viewers across 53 Asian countries" and claimed a daily viewership of some 100 million (Thussu, 2007).

Murdoch developed ties to politicians across the globe so that they would support him, even as he supported them. Elected officials from Hillary Clinton to Donald Trump, from Tony Blair to David Cameron, have known that their rise or fall is in part dependent on him (Galloway, 2018: 103). People not only respect Murdoch but are also afraid of him. Therefore, efforts to understand Murdoch's media universe are often compared to Kremlinology (Grynbaum, 2020).

The biographers and critics of Murdoch have generally emphasised his business activity as his overriding and even sole motivation (McKnight, 2010). To them, Murdoch is a businessman who is ultimately more interested in profit than politics (Fallows, 2003) and his interest in politics is to a large extent directly related to his ability to conduct business (Gershon, 1997). Accordingly, Murdoch's political affiliations move swiftly in accordance, not with political ideology but with NewsCorp's bottom line (Arsenault & Castells, 2008). The bigger Murdoch's empire became, the more power he consolidated to clear away obstacles to its further expansion (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019a).

Nick Davies, the Guardian journalist who in 2011 broke the New International phone hacking scandal – wherein it was revealed Murdoch employees hacked the phones of British celebrities, politicians, and royalty – wrote in his book *Hack Attack* that Murdoch's use of power is far subtler than outsiders imagine. "He may be a highly political animal, they say – obsessed with the details of life in the corridors of power and personally possessed of some extremely right-wing opinions – but what he most wants from politicians is favours for his business. He'll betray his own principles, he'll embrace politicians for whom he has very little respect, just as long as they have the power to help the company get bigger" (Davies, 2018c). Surprisingly, Murdoch has endorsed such a view of his own devotion to profits before politics (Shawcross, 1992:302).

In practice, Murdoch and NewsCorp have spent hundreds of millions of dollars over the decades in advancing political goals by propping up newspapers that are financial losers, inter alia The New York Post (Auletta, 1995:86) and The London Times. The Times runs at a great annual loss, which is subsidised by its profitable sister paper the Sunday Times. The national daily in his country of birth, The Australian, also lost money for its first 20 years and even today does not always make a profit (Stecklow et al, 2007).

Murdoch argues that the reason for these subsidies is because he supports competition and choice for readers. But it is widely believed that the real reason lies in Murdoch's desire for political influence (McKnight, 2010). He sees the news media as being more than merely a commercial enterprise (Chenoweth, 2001; Neil, 1996; Page, 2003; Shawcross, 1993; Wolff, 2008). He recognises their significance as cultural engines capable of both interpreting and shaping reality. To date, Murdoch has shown no trepidation in the use of this power (Hobbs, 2010). McKnight's (2010) historical analysis argues that NewsCorp is unique among media conglomerates in its commitment to Murdoch's ideological beliefs, providing evidence that

Murdoch is willing to let some of his newspapers lose great sums of money in the service of the promotion of his beliefs (Wagner, 2014).

It is no doubt that Murdoch is not merely a businessman who happens to court politicians for regulatory quid pro quo; rather, Murdoch is, in the words of a former executive of News Corporation, “a frustrated politician ... [who] can’t leave politics alone” (McKnight, 2003: 348). This is not to claim, however, that Murdoch’s politics are always clear or that his behaviour is dogmatically determined by his ideological proclivities. He has learnt when to restrain his natural right-wing political leanings in order to safeguard his financial interests, as evidenced by his endorsement of Tony Blair’s New Labour (Street, 2001: 133-139) along with his wooing of China’s communist party (Curtin, 2005).

The most frequently cited evidence that Murdoch puts profit before political beliefs was his newspapers’ support in 1997 of the election of Blair. This move is offered as proof of his political pragmatism and preparedness to discard his previous support for the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher. Against such views, it is equally arguable that Murdoch’s support for Blair simply recognised that the political centre in Britain had moved towards a new Thatcherite consensus, which Labour Party shared. Namely, rather than Murdoch shifting to support Labour, Labour had shifted to win his (and others) support. Indeed, it could be argued that Murdoch’s news media helped create the shift to the new consensus and hence assisted the convergence of political parties (McKnight, 2010). Despite Murdoch occasionally shifting his allegiances between politicians and parties, he has shown remarkable consistency regarding his support for right-wing ideologies.

As Castells (2007) argues, power relationships are largely defined within the space of communication in a network society. This means that global media groups are key social actors because they help to shape the social world by exerting control over issue-framing and information gatekeeping (Bagdikian, 2004). These organizations play dual roles. They are not only corporate and media actors in their own right, but they control a disproportionate number of communication delivery platforms that constitute the space in which power – whether it is political, economic or social – is articulated (Arsenault & Castells, 2008).

Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, Murdoch’s power is augmented by his ability to act as what Castells (2004) conceptualized as a ‘switcher’, or a connection point between political, economic and media networks that facilitates their cooperation by programming common goals and resources. To paraphrase Lord Palmerston’s description of 19th-century Britain, Murdoch’s empire has no eternal allies and no perpetual enemies, only permanent interests (Cassidy, 2006).

In this framework, the Murdoch/NewsCorp business model is founded on three broad strategies: (1) vertical control and horizontal networking, (2) ruthless pursuit of market expansion, and (3) the leveraging of public and political-elite opinion. These components are interrelated, mutually constitutive, and predicated on the ability of Murdoch via NewsCorp to serve as a switching point, connecting media, political, and economic networks in the shared project of the company’s financial expansion (Arsenault & Castells, 2008). Thus, “Murdoch has become a cancer – an arrogant cancer on democracy” in the words of former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, by monopolizing or affecting the characteristics of media power in many parts of the world (Cottle, 2003, p21).



News Corporation sign at headquarters building in New York City.

A Keen Supporter of Right-Wing Ideologies and Populism

According to McKnight & Hobbs (2011), Murdoch's international media empire has an historical tendency to support right-wing ideologies and to promote some radically conservative ideas, with key executive staff and occasional editorial interventions used to create a partisan pattern of media content. Significant parts of his international media conglomerate constitute what might be labelled a "multi-state ideological apparatus" (Althusser, 1971). In this sense, what distinguishes NewsCorp from its rivals is the fact that it is the only media conglomerate created, built, and dominated by the vision and tenacity of one individual (Page, 2003). As Robert McChesney has noted: "More than any other figure, Murdoch has been the visionary of a global corporate media empire" (McChesney, 1999: 96). When Murdoch took control of the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) in 2007, Bill Moyers writing on AlterNet.org that he "is to propriety what the Marquis de Sade was to chastity. When it comes to money and power, he's carnivorous: all appetite and no taste. He'll eat anything in his path" (Wagner, 2014).

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Murdoch's vertical control allows NewsCorp to function as a more targeted political weapon in comparison to its peers. This political leverage facilitates NewsCorp's ability to expand its holdings through the granting of regulatory favours, leading to larger audience shares, which in turn expands its political clout, creating a cycle of influence.

Over the decades, Murdoch's NewsCorp became the world's largest media conglomerate, with its diverse cultural products consumed in over 100 countries across six continents (News Corporation, 2008:1-11). NewsCorp has enfolded within its operations film production and distribution, television production and

broadcasting, advertising, newspaper and magazine publishing, book publishing, football teams and other sports teams, multimedia, information technology, and music publishing. Among NewsCorp's assets were the US Fox Broadcasting network, the Twentieth Century Fox film studio, the book publisher HarperCollins, the online social network MySpace, over 175 newspaper titles in the UK, Australia, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and the US, and satellite television networks in Italy, Asia, and Britain (Finkelstein, 2007). As of October 2007, NewsCorp also owned more than 1,445 subsidiaries in over 50 countries (NewsCorp, 2007). This complex ownership structure, even when compared to other multimedia corporations, has been another one of NewsCorp's key strengths (Arsenault & Castells, 2008).

Murdoch and NewsCorp use key operational strategies such as political brokering, leveraging public opinion, sensationalist news headlines, customizing media content, and diversifying and adapting media holdings in the face of technological and regulatory changes to penetrate new markets and expand audience share (Arsenault & Castells, 2008). Murdoch's strategy of global expansion is also premised on the creation of mutually advantageous synergies between different media sectors (Flew & Gilmour, 2003). He reportedly seeks to exploit "vertical integration" to control the various links in the media supply chain, from production to distribution, while expanding "horizontally" across different media formats and sectors, thereby creating cross-promotional opportunities and "spin-off" products (Flew & Gilmour, 2003; Hobbs, 2009).

Of course, Murdoch does not directly control every editorial aspect of his vast network of news media (Neil, 1996:164). According to Andrew Neil, whom Murdoch appointed to edit one of his newspapers in 1983, Murdoch's editorial power is generally more subtle, in that he: (1) employs editors who broadly agree with his political beliefs; (2) favours staff, or "courtiers," who reaffirm his social and economic views; and (3) makes his political values regularly known to editorial and managerial staff (Shawcross, 1993; Page, 2003). Murdoch's corporate control facilitates and is facilitated by his ability

to intervene in the editorial policies of his vast holdings (Barr, 2000). A February 2003 Guardian survey found that all 175 NewsCorp-controlled newspapers mimicked Murdoch's support for the invasion of Iraq, George Bush, and Tony Blair – and were equally derisive of anti-war protesters (Greenslade, 2003).

Meanwhile, Murdoch's vertical control allows NewsCorp to function as a more targeted political weapon in comparison to its peers. This political leverage facilitates NewsCorp's ability to expand its holdings through the granting of regulatory favours, leading to larger audience shares, which in turn expands its political clout, creating a cycle of influence (Arsenault & Castells, 2008). Despite business and economics – not ideology and partisanship – providing the central unifying theme of Murdoch's political agenda (Baker, 1998; Fallows, 2003), the perception that Murdoch, via his editorial control over his properties, wields disproportionate control over public opinion provides him with considerable political leverage (Arsenault & Castells, 2008).

It was Neil (1996) who first gave Murdoch one of his most durable nicknames – the Sun King. It remains one of the most indelible descriptions of Murdoch. In his book *Full Disclosure*, he wrote: "When you work for Rupert Murdoch you do not work for a company chairman or chief executive: you work for a Sun King. You are not a director or a manager or an editor: you are a courtier at the court of the Sun King ... All life revolves around the Sun King: all authority comes from him. He is the only one to whom allegiance must be owed and he expects his remit to run everywhere, his word to be final. There are no other references but him. He is the only benchmark and anybody of importance reports direct to him. Normal management structures – all the traditional lines of authority, communication and decision-taking in the modern business corporation – do not matter. The Sun King is all that matters," (Cooke, 2018).

Rupert Murdoch has been married four times and has six children. His first wife was Patricia Booker, and they had one daughter, Prudence (b. 1958), before they divorced in the mid-1960s. Murdoch mar-

ried Anna Torv in 1968, and they had three children (Elisabeth, Lachlan, and James). They were divorced in 1999. Murdoch then married Wendi Deng, and they had two children, Grace and Chloe, before the couple divorced. Finally, in 2016, he married Jerry Hall, actress and model, and former partner of Mick Jagger.



Rupert Murdoch & Jerry Hall at the 73rd Annual Golden Globe Awards at the Beverly Hilton Hotel in Los Angeles, CA on January 10, 2016.

Murdoch's Long Trajectory From Leftism to Right-Wing Populism

A widely accepted view of Murdoch's political evolution is one beginning with youthful leftism and eventually moving across the spectrum to the conservative right. However, it would be more correct to say that the trajectory followed by Murdoch started with an Australian nationalist position, often expressed as opposition to the "British Establishment" (Shawcross, 1992: 66-7; Regan, 1976: 98-9). This was combined with a degree of social libertar-

ianism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But from the late 1970s on, Murdoch has endorsed more conservative causes, just as conservative political thought was poised to shift toward economic libertarianism (McKnight, 2003).

Murdoch's political worldview became more stable, internally consistent, and far more to the right over time. He became much more hawkish on defence issues. Save defence, though, he has favoured smaller government and reduced taxes. Over the long course of his career, he moved from being an enthusiast for political involvement and a supplicant to politicians, to becoming an established source of patronage who expected politicians to court him (McKnight, 2010).

This "courting" has led to questions about the independence of his media outlets. But asking whether Fox News is an arm of the Trump White House risks missing the larger picture. It may be more accurate to say that the White House — just like the prime ministers' offices in Britain and Australia — is just one tool among many that Murdoch uses to exert influence over world events. "Republicans originally thought that Fox worked for us," David Frum, a former speechwriter for George W. Bush, said in an interview with "Nightline." "And now we're discovering we work for Fox" (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019a).

McKnight argues that Murdoch led the way in establishing a transatlantic "bridge" or platform for ideas to be exchanged between Britain and the US during the Reagan-Thatcher years. The flow of traffic across the bridge was largely one-way, with the Sunday Times importing into the UK a "local variant" of Reagan's "conservative populism" in the form of "market populism." This approach "championed a view of economic markets which saw them as the friend of the ordinary people and which damned critics of markets as 'establishments' and 'elites'" (Daddow, 2012).

The populism articulated by Murdoch's media outlets has a distinctive quality thanks to its belief in the virtues of free markets, deregulation, and privatisation. When combined, these elements form

what has been called “market populism” (McKnight, 2010). This amounts to a view that economic markets “expressed the popular will more articulately and more meaningfully than did mere elections” (Frank, 2002: XIV). It has been argued the decline of the working class-based Left has been matched by the rise of the rhetorical stance of market populism and anti-elitism on the Right – essentially to garner the support of blue collar workers for conservatism (Frank, 2004).

Just two years after Murdoch bought the Sunday Times it had become “a hard line paper of the Right” on foreign policy and industrial relations, according to Young (1984). Murdoch’s influence in promoting the Thatcherite stance of the Sunday Times was confirmed by Neil. According to him, “Rupert expects his papers to stand broadly for what he believes: a combination of right-wing Republicanism from America mixed with undiluted Thatcherism from Britain ... the resulting potage is a radical-right dose of free market economics, the social agenda of the Christian Moral Majority and hard-line conservative views on subjects like drugs, abortion, law and order and defence” (Neil, 1996: 165).

“I don’t know that my views are as right wing as they’re painted to be,” Murdoch once said, but Neil countered that his former boss is much more right wing than he first appears. Perhaps what Murdoch means is that he is a social moderate: years ago, he dabbled with the candidacy of the televangelist Pat Robertson, but now cultivates only a garden-variety homophobia, which he has the sense to keep quiet about. “I’m considered homophobic and crazy about these things and old-fashioned” was his take on same-sex marriage. When Watergate happened, Murdoch’s response – pumping ideological fear – broke with the rest of the journalistic class. “The American press might get their pleasure in successfully crucifying Nixon,” he said, “but the last laugh could be on them. See how they like it when the Commies take over the West” (Cooke, 2018).

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The Murdoch empire did not cause the right-wing populist wave, but it enabled it, promoted it, and profited from it. His media has helped elevate marginal demagogues and mainstream ethno-nationalism and politicized the very notion of truth. It may not have been Murdoch’s mission to destabilize democracies, but that has been his most consequential legacy.

An Immigrant Nationalist And Multi-Billionaire Outsider

As an immigrant stoking nationalism, a billionaire championing populism (Mahler & Rutenberg, 2019) – Murdoch and his global media empire have promoted right-wing politics, stoked reactionary populism (Stack, 2019), and helped reshape democratic governments (Kwai, 2020) across the globe. The “Murdochization” of media (and even politics) characterizes a “process which involves the shift of media power from the public to privately owned transnational multimedia corporations controlling both delivery systems and the content of global information networks” (Thussu, 1998: 7).

Of course, the Murdoch empire did not cause the right-wing populist wave – but it enabled it, promoted it, and profited from it. Murdoch’s media outlets have helped elevate marginal demagogues and mainstream ethno-nationalism, while also politicizing the very notion of truth. It may not have been Murdoch’s mission to destabilize democracies, but that has been his most consequential legacy (Mahler & Rutenberg, 2019a).

Murdoch’s populism distinguished itself not so much by the way it encouraged his readers and viewers to kick down against immigrants, homosexuals, and minorities, but by how it encouraged them to kick up. It drew upon the New Class concept developed by conservative intellectuals such as Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Christopher Lasch, etc in response to the emergence of a white-collar elite, identifiable by its cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and liberalism – all notions that are antithetical to nationalists (Sparrow, 2011).

Although Murdoch, his immediate family, and his executives are elite by any measure of the word, his targets both nationally and internationally are the nefarious, cosmopolitan, and multicultural “elites.” Anyway, it makes sense, accord-

ing to Cooke, when one takes the weird Murdochian understanding into consideration: “A wealthy lawyer would never be described as elitist unless they work in human rights. Fighting racism is the real racism. Fighting sexism is the real sexism. Fighting elitism is the real elitism. A multinational media company is not globalist though, because Murdoch believes in sovereignty. Particularly his own” (Cooke, 2018).

On the other hand, Hendrikse and Fernandez argue that the rise of right-wing populism is closely linked to the growth of offshore finance and global oligarchs like Murdoch. These oligarchs are driving populist agitation despite right-wing populists around the world claiming that they must protect their nation from exploitative global elites (Hendrikse & Fernandez, 2019). According to the authors, right-wing populists are actually serving the interests of oligarchic billionaires. Right-wing populists tend to say “yes” to free finance and free trade, but “no” to free migration, democracy, multilateralism, and human equality – a worldview that almost perfectly aligns with the political goals of oligarchs like Murdoch. The super-rich are indeed using populist forces and deliberately manipulating nationalist sentiments. In the meantime, global media barons, of whom Murdoch is probably the most prominent, have supplemented “neoliberal narratives with nativist venom, selling the virtues of patriotism while themselves living as true ‘citizens of nowhere’” (Dembowski, 2019).

A key to understanding the worldview that distinguishes Murdoch and NewsCorp is the recurring notion that a powerful elite promotes left-wing ideas and liberalism. Most commonly, this is expressed through the phrase “the liberal elite” and references to an “intellectual establishment.” In this worldview, the elites are a group of people whose ideas are so powerful that they oppress the rest of society. More specifically, liberal elites are politically correct, and they have captured government, mass media, and higher education. Their ideas on culture and politics dominate society at large. In this discursive framework, the attacks on the elite by editorials and columnists in Murdoch’s newspapers are seen as legitimate pro-

tests from an oppressed and marginalised group struggling against this domination (McKnight, 2010).

With this understanding, Murdoch seeks to portray himself as an “outsider and friend of the ordinary, of the people, continually battling away against the vested interests” (Du Gay, 2008: 83). This stance is evident especially in Murdoch’s newspapers in both Britain and Australia. This was the case with the Sunday Times in the 1980s and early 1990s, which articulated an “anti-establishment” view combined with a free market orthodoxy (McKnight, 2009). In a study of Murdoch’s newspapers in Australia, a consistent anti-elite market populism appeared among editorials and leading columnists. Murdoch’s easy transition to the side of capital, shedding his undergraduate state socialism in the process, glosses over something more fundamental. According to Cooke (2018), he has never stopped being a Leninist, at least in the sense of wanting to destroy the contemporary establishment.

Cooke explains the psychological explanation for this is rooted in “Murdoch’s status as a perpetual outsider.” At Geelong Grammar, he was the son of a press baron, not the offspring of landed gentry, and was bullied accordingly. He was a colonial in Great Britain, and a man of initiative in the stuffy languor of Menzies’ Australia. In the US, he was a foreigner trying to do business in New York City with no connections and a newspaper proprietor who did not share America’s sacral view of the press. He hated all of these incumbent attitudes and not only sought revenge on them but also saw them as opportunities for arbitrage (Cooke, 2018).

The ur-establishment Murdoch set himself against, the template for all the others, was Establishment Britain after the Second World War. He encountered it twice, first in 1950 as a student at Oxford, then again when he started his British newspaper empire, beginning with the purchase of the News of the World in 1969 (Cooke, 2018). When Murdoch entered the British newspaper market, London society shunned him and his vulgar tabloids, The Sun and The News of the World, which he used to wound his enemies and advance his political interests. (Chozick, 2017). In

Australia, the Murdochs were unusual among establishment families for their Anglophobia, and Rupert reserved special hostility for English snobbery. The hostility was reciprocated – at Oxford, a magazine described him as a “brilliant betting man with the individual Billingsgate touch,” a reference to the coarse, working-class fish market known for its foul language (Cooke, 2018).

An Anti-Elitist Elite

Due to his outsider status, Murdoch and his media empire can take an anti-elitist stance despite Murdoch himself being an elite. It is no problem that anti-elitism is historically associated with the poor and the trade unions, which have long railed against the power of money and privilege. In terms of political theory, the name for this resistance to the domination of elites is populism (Canovan, 1981). Once a progressive force associated with the Left until the middle of the 20th century, populism has more recently been identified as part of a conservative resurgence that connected Republican politicians such as Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan to working class voters (Perlstein, 2008: 277). The identification of populism as a key part of the successful coalition behind Reagan was made by several commentators who articulated its characteristic elements as framing opponents as “elites” and advocating for small government (Federici, 1991: 61-71).

Murdoch and his media empire are fiercely dedicated to a political project that will eliminate trade unions, abolish

and/or commercialize public education, increase economic inequality and the power of billionaires and big business, ignore and aggravate the environmental crisis that threatens human existence, promote endless wars and militarism, advocate for governance by and for the rich, corrupt the judicial system, and protect elections that go to the highest (anonymous) bidders. Above all, Murdoch champions the elimination of independent journalism. All the institutions that make for a credible modern democracy are in his crosshairs (McChesney, 2014).

In terms of Murdoch’s media background, populist anti-elitism is a natural fit for the segment of his tabloid formula claiming to protect the interests of ordinary people. In 1977, after his takeover of The New York Post and New York Magazine, he railed against elitist journalism (McKnight, 2010): “A press that fails to interest the whole community is one that will ultimately become the house organ of the elite” (Shawcross, 1991:186). Twenty-seven years later, in defence of Fox News and The New York Post, Murdoch repeated this rationale: “The traditional media in this country is in tune with the elite, not the people ... That is why we’re not liked by the traditional media. That’s not us” (Strupp, 2004).

Similarly, “The Sun has no party politics,” ran a front-page manifesto in its first week proper under Murdoch management: “The Sun is a radical newspaper. We are not going to bow to the establishment in any of its privileged enclaves. Ever.” Funny, hypocritical, racist, jingoist, homophobic, and leering, and with a new disdain for the royal family generally and their privacy in particular, together The Sun and the News of the World transformed the UK – and in the process degraded it. It was the ultimate form of colonial revenge. Britain, not Australia, Murdoch seemed to say, was the crass and ugly place, with the coarse and common people with the insatiably lurid tastes. Just look at its press. Christopher Hitchens called the process “the replacement of gutter journalism by sewer journalism.” Cooke says instead of repudiating this sort of charge, Murdoch and his employees revelled in it (Cooke, 2018).

In addition, criticisms of the “liberal

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media” motivate Murdoch’s media entities. It was this motivation that drove him to establish Fox News. Murdoch had long accused CNN of being “too liberal,” and the future head of Fox News, Roger Ailes, promised to “restore objectivity [to news media]” (Collins, 2004: 24). Criticism of the liberal media has been a regular feature in comments by Fox News hosts such as Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity. Moreover, Fox News carries a regular program, Fox News Watch, which criticises media coverage. Such criticisms are weighted towards discovering “liberal bias” in what it refers to as “the mainstream media” (McKnight, 2010).

Further, Murdoch personally criticised The New York Times for its liberal agenda: “I think that Arthur Sulzberger, over the years, has made it very clear that he wants a very liberal paper, and that he wants a staff that reflects that community. For five years, he didn’t want any white heterosexual men hired” (Esquire, 2008). According to the accounts of former employees, Murdoch’s NewsCorp has a distinctive culture that totally fits with right-wing populism’s tenets: tribal, aggressive, and centred around powerful editors. A former NewsCorp insider described it as an aggressive, masculine culture – although there are also women in NewsCorp’s executive and editorial ranks. The culture of NewsCorp has also been described by some past executives and former staff as “bullying” and “vindictive” (Davies, 2018b).

According to McKnight (2010), remarks targeting the liberal media elite not only reveal Murdoch’s long-standing political views; they also constitute a business model. They resonate with the latent and widespread public scepticism toward “the media,” and thus distinguish NewsCorp from its commercial competitors. In Australia and Britain, attacks on the “liberal media” take the form of attacks on the public broadcasters, the BBC which Murdoch blamed on “the narrow elite [who] controls it” and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) (Evans, 1989). When Murdoch launched Sky Television, his barely hid his intent to compete with the BBC, which stood in the way of a privatised broadcasting system, part of which Murdoch wanted to own. Columnists in The Sun and The Times attacked the

BBC for its perceived “left wing” bias and elitism. The news programs of the ABC are also “guilty of a consistent left-liberal slant,” according to Murdoch’s Australian newspaper (McKnight, 2003).

Another distinctive feature of Murdoch’s media is that his entities hold long-standing policies towards major matters (e.g. the Iraq war and global warming) of public interest and campaign for these policies (McKnight, 2010). The sole instance of a dissident view on Iraq within the editorials of a News Corporation newspaper occurred in the Mercury, a newspaper on the island state of Tasmania, in Australia. In September 2002, an editorial argued that it “would be wrong for the US to pre-emptively attack Iraq. It would be wrong for Australia to ride shotgun to any unilateral US assault on the hated regime of Saddam Hussein” (Hobart Mercury, 2002). After a written directive from company headquarters, the newspaper’s stance changed dramatically (Manne, 2005:76). By early 2003, its editorials spoke in terms of Saddam’s “barbarism” and argued that Australia was compelled to contribute troops to an attack (Hobart Mercury, 2003). Meanwhile, when Murdoch announced a change in News Corporation’s policy on climate change in May 2007 and warned that it posed “clear catastrophic threats” to the world (Nason, 2007), The Sun immediately announced that “[t]oo many of us have spent too long in denial over the threat from global warming” (The Sun, 2006).

Murdoch’s biggest publishing house, HarperCollins, has functioned in parallel with his media outlets. McKnight & Hobbs (2011) suggest four elements of taxonomy of conservative books published by HarperCollins. First, the nurturing of the conservative and Republican political culture, especially its history and heroes; second, books arising from specific ideological campaigns fostered by the conservative movement in the US over the last 20 years; third, books institutionally linked to other conservative NewsCorp media outlets such as the journal the Weekly Standard and the cable TV channel, Fox News; and, fourth, a number of books reflecting the ideological enthusiasms of Murdoch himself (McKnight & Hobbs, 2011). Despite his guarantees of editorial independence,

HarperCollins, much like the other assets of NewsCorp, operates in accordance with the wishes of Murdoch, and appears to reflect his beliefs and political values (Belfield et al., 1991:242).

Another concrete expression of Murdoch's exercise of influence on right-wing politics has been the systematic links between himself, his media outlets, and several conservative think tanks in the US, Britain, and Australia. Murdoch has been on the board of three conservative think tanks (McKnight, 2010). The first was the Hoover Institution, in 1987-88, during the high tide of Reaganism. In Australia, Murdoch joined the advisory council of the conservative Institute for Public Affairs, and he was also a generous donor to the same body (Burton, 2007:107). In 1997, he joined the board of the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian think tank, set up by the owner of the largest private oil company in the US. At the time, the Cato Institute was running an active campaign of climate change denial. No think tank from the left or centre has any kind of relationship with either Murdoch or his news media (McKnight, 2010).

Murdoch has also supported small activist intellectual groups (McKnight, 2003). In 1989, he personally authorized financial support for a friend and adviser of Margaret Thatcher, David Hart, who published a confidential newsletter smearing Labour and other public figures for alleged links with communism (Rose, 1990b). In 1988, Murdoch had thanked Hart for sending him a copy of the newsletter, *World Briefing*, and asked "Are you sending it to any of our other editors—or should I circulate it?" The following year he authorized "£40,000 per year for three years, in addition to the £150,000 previously agreed" (Rose, 1990a). A similar connection was Murdoch's financial support for the US neo-conservative Norman Podhoretz and his influential magazine *Commentary* (Alterman, 1997: 8).



Hundreds of climate activists lie down in front of News Corp Australia headquarters in Sydney calling the Murdoch press liars on January 31, 2020.

Australia or Murdochland

There is nothing new about claims that Murdoch's newspapers in Australia are not just right-wing, but distort and manufacture news, campaigning for favoured political parties without the obligation of fairness. There is also nothing new about concern over the impact the company, which controls 70 percent of Australia's newspaper circulation, might have on democratic debate (Alcorn, 2019, Hobbs, 2010, Tiffin, 2010). Former Prime Minister Rudd's campaign manager, Bruce Hawker, wrote that NewsCorp is "easily the most powerful political force in Australia, bigger than the major parties or the combined weight of the unions" (Cooke, 2018).

The Murdoch family changed Australian politics in 2016 when it took control of Sky News Australia and imported the Fox News model. They quickly introduced a slate of right-wing opinion shows that often focused on race, immigration, and climate change denial; recently, Murdoch's media empire has called for the lifting of all coronavirus-related restrictions (Simons, 2020). The program known as Sky After Dark (Stack, 2019), features its hosts and their guests stirring up anger over the perceived liberal bias of the media, the

"suicidal self-hatred" of Western civilization, and the Australian equivalent of the Central American "caravans" to the US – emigres coming to the country by boat from Indonesia and Malaysia (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019b). Murdoch's outlets also led an effort to repeal the country's carbon tax and pushed out a series of prime ministers whose agendas didn't comport with his own (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019a).

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Underlining the fact that today's Australia feels more insular, völkisch, and hostile in character than its near neighbour New Zealand, Cooke (2018) asks: Is this just an accident of history or the end product of strong Murdoch influence in one place and weak Murdoch influence in the other?

Murdoch's elder son Lachlan built alliances in the country, drawing close to Tony Abbott, a right-wing member of Parliament with a confrontational style (Mahler & Rutenberg, 2019c). Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, a moderate and long-time nemesis of Abbott, was replaced by the right-wing nationalist Scott Morrison (Stack, 2019) through a definitive intraparty vote. The small number of Australian media outlets that the Murdochs did not own portrayed Turnbull's ouster as a Murdoch-led "coup." In his farewell speech in August 2018, Turnbull pointed to "outside forces in the media" as the architects of his demise. Morrison quickly aligned himself with US President Trump (Mahler & Rutenberg, 2019b).

Murdoch and his ubiquitous NewsCorp empire played a major role in orchestrating the removal from office of not just Turnbull but also Labour's Prime Minister Rudd. Rudd also believes NewsCorp undermined his first prime ministership, as well as that of successor Julia Gillard. He has called for a "full-throated inquiry" into NewsCorp and branded the company "a cancer on democracy." Rudd is one of the few politicians who has dared to speak out about News Corp (Davies, 2018a). A petition posted in October 2020 by Rudd asks the government to establish a Royal Commission into the dominance over Australian media by Murdoch's NewsCorp and its impact on the country's political landscape. The petition has been signed by over 280,000 people (Simons, 2020).

Critics say Murdoch's media outlets have undermined efforts to fight climate change, pushed governments into hard-line policies on issues like migration, and employed language and images widely seen as racist (Kwai, 2020). Underlining the fact that today's Australia feels more insular, *völkisch*, and hostile in character than its near neighbour New Zealand, Cooke (2018) asks: Is this just an accident of history or the end product of strong Murdoch influence in one place and weak Murdoch influence in the other? However, the consequence of the ethno-nationalist fervour that the Murdoch media has amplified in Australia has impacted New Zealand, where an Australian white nationalist, Brenton Tarrant, stood accused of killing 50 worshipers at two

Christchurch mosques on March 14, 2019. Tarrant was a fan of the white nationalist Blair Cottrell, whose deferential treatment by Sky caused a national outcry (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019b).



Rupert Murdoch shuttered the News of the World newspaper, but the hacking scandal continued to grow.

The UK: Under the Siege of Murdoch's Media Octopus

It was Murdoch's belief in the commercial potential of satellite broadcasting that prompted his relentless efforts to privatize satellite broadcasting in Britain. In the late 1980s, after he lost his bid for the British government's sole satellite broadcasting license (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019a), he risked millions of pounds to invest in the Luxemburg-based Astra satellite. It was through Astra that Murdoch's Sky network was able to beam across the UK and, within a decade, change the broadcasting ecology of Britain (Thussu, 2007).

Murdoch's British tabloids helped advance the agendas of British leaders.

Lance Price, a former Blair spokesman, referred to Murdoch as “effectively a member of Blair’s cabinet.” In turn, Murdoch faced little government scrutiny as he expanded his media empire to reach 40 percent of British newspaper readers and millions of television viewers (Chozick, 2017). Blair learned, however, that even a special relationship with the media baron can sour quickly. He and Murdoch – once so close that Blair was the godfather to Grace Murdoch – are no longer on speaking terms. During the British government’s 2012 inquiry into the mogul’s political influence, Blair described what it was like when a subject falls out of favour with a Murdoch-controlled tabloid. “Once they’re against you, that’s it,” Blair said. “It’s full on, full frontal, day in, day out, basically a lifetime commitment” (Chozick, 2017).

As mentioned before, Murdoch’s whole career has been marked by controversy. But the phone hacking scandal in the UK, which came to light in July 2011, dwarfed all the previous scandals. The extensive investigative journalism of Nick Davies revealed that Murdoch’s Sunday paper, the News of the World, had hacked into the phone of teenage murder victim Millie Dowler. Mounting evidence indicated that newspaper staffers had engaged in illegal and unethical behaviour, notably the hacking of mobile phone mailboxes belonging to celebrities, murder victims, and British soldiers killed in Afghanistan. Murdoch shuttered the newspaper, but the scandal continued to grow. He subsequently testified on several occasions before British MPs, claiming that he had been unaware of the hacking (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020).



Last day of the famous tabloid News of the World website after the scandal of phone hacking by the newspaper, on July 10, 2011 in London. News of the World was on sale since 1843.

Building Euroscepticism to Pave the Way for Brexit

Murdoch's newspapers and television networks have been instrumental in amplifying nativist revolt around the globe (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019a), and including in the UK. The Sun spent years demonizing the European Union (EU) to its British readers (Stack, 2019). Daddow has examined the impact of changing media coverage of European integration in Britain since accession to the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973, specifically through a consideration of the

causes behind the collapse of the "permissive consensus" on European affairs. Since the 1975 referendum, this consensus has given way to a form of "destructive dissent" across vast swaths of media, particularly UK tabloids. The collapse in media support for the EU project has been expressed in a number of ways, some of them bordering on the nationalist and/or xenophobic, and opportunities for the expression of such views have merely been increased by the EU's own efforts to deepen integration in the face of widespread popular distrust of both national politicians and supranational constitution-building (Daddow, 2012).

Daddow alights on the "Murdoch effect" as a core explanation for this general shift in attitudes. Murdoch was the market

leader on Euroscepticism, as expressed in agenda-setting outlets such as The Sun, The Times and The Sunday Times. Daddow suggests that Murdoch led the way in creating a climate of fear around European matters that severely tested the leadership qualities of even notionally pro-European prime ministers on this vexed question in British politics (Daddow, 2012).

Opposing touchstone EEC policies using the “straight-talking” language of the “common man” became the characteristic Murdoch position. The Sunday Times and its Murdoch tabloid stablemates have crafted a workable, socially conservative, populist line on European matters for years.

The Murdoch empire has not been the only repository of hard and/or xenophobic Euroscepticism in Britain, but it has been the pace-setter. The intensification of anti-European activity in Britain around the time of the Maastricht Treaty goes some way to showing the synergy between the Thatcher foreign policy agenda and Murdoch-inspired Euroscepticism. This scepticism became more bombastic, injected a greater sense of urgency into the debates by presenting treaty reforms as existential threats to British sovereignty and identity, became less deferential to politicians and

“elites,” and was deeply critical of “foreign” machinations that threatened supposedly objective British interests (Daddow, 2012).

A former Downing Street insider has ventured to suggest that European affairs were part of a Faustian pact between Blair and the Murdoch machine. Price was informed: “We’ve promised (Murdoch’s) News International we won’t make any changes to our Europe policy without informing them” (Daddow, 2012). When Blair refused to call a referendum on the proposed EU Constitutional Treaty in 2004, he was attacked vehemently by Murdoch, who personally insisted on the News of the World labelling Blair a “traitor” in its headline attacking the decision (Seldon et al., 2007: 266). New Labour was also told that it would not receive the backing of News International titles in the 2005 general election unless Blair did a U-turn. “He did, and within days The Sun secured the scoop” (Daddow, 2012). Backed by evidence of Murdoch’s deal-making style and abhorrence of the European project, many observers in policy and academic circles have embraced the view that Blair’s European policies were indeed the result of a “Faustian pact” with Murdoch (Wallace, 2006: 63).

Murdoch’s News International, with willing support from ideological Eurosceptics across the top-selling UK tabloid and broadsheets, has proved effective at keeping the British public in a permanent state of “war” with the EU since the 1980s (Daddow, 2012). Prime Minister John Major told a judicial inquiry in 1997 that Murdoch said that he could not support him if he didn’t change his stance toward Europe, which Major took as a demand for an EU referendum (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019a).

Murdoch had a hand in the British right threatening to drive Britain out of the EU, too. The Sun had long been advocating for an exit from the EU, and so had Murdoch himself, distilling his opposition to the EU into a single quote attributed to Anthony Hilton, a columnist at The Evening Standard: “When I go into Downing Street, they do what I say; when I go to Brussels, they take no notice” (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019a).

Murdoch’s media, especially The Sun,

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Murdoch’s News International, with willing support from ideological Eurosceptics across the top-selling UK tabloid and broadsheets, has proved effective at keeping the British public in a permanent state of “war” with the EU since the 1980s and paved the way for Brexit.

cast Brexit as a choice between the “arrogant Europhiles” and the country’s working class, while railing against “mass immigration which keeps wages low and puts catastrophic pressure on our schools, hospitals, roads and housing stock” (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019a). It helped lead the Brexit campaign that persuaded a slim majority of voters in a 2016 referendum to endorse pulling out of the bloc (Stack, 2019). The Sun’s cover on the day of the Brexit referendum was a picture of corporate synergy: “Independence Day: Britain’s Resurgence,” it read, over a mock version of the poster for the 21st Century Fox movie “Independence Day: Resurgence,” which opened in Britain that day. Murdoch likened the country’s decision to leave the EU to “a prison break” and celebrated the vote with Nigel Farage, a leading architect of Brexit, at a garden party at the London mansion of the Russian oligarch Evgeny Lebedev.

The referendum represented the realization of a long-deferred dream for Murdoch. But it also returned him to a position of influence in British politics. Not only had The Sun played a critical role in delivering the Brexit vote, but in the ensuing political upheaval, it had swung behind Theresa May. Once in office, she found time for a private meeting with Murdoch on one of her first foreign trips: a less-than-36-hour visit to New York to address the United Nations (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019a). In sum, the Murdoch effect on media coverage of the EU in Britain has been dramatic.

Murdoch and the “FOX Effect” on American Politics

In 1973, Murdoch entered the American newspaper business. In the 1980s and ’90s, Murdoch bought a number of American publications and amassed major holdings in other communications ventures, including radio and television stations and video, film, and record companies, as well as book publishing. In 1985, Murdoch took the step of becoming a naturalised US cit-

izen in order to facilitate a move into the US television market (Finkelstein, 2007). The same year he acquired the Twentieth Century–Fox Film Corporation and bought several independent American television stations from Metromedia, Inc., and then consolidated both these ventures into a new company, Fox, Inc. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020).

In 1995, NewsCorp entered into a partnership with MCI Communications Corporation, a major provider of long-distance telecommunications services in the US. The following year, Murdoch sought to expand his presence in American television with the launch of Fox News, a news and political commentary channel that has become enormously influential. In 2007, he made news with the announcement that NewsCorp was acquiring Dow Jones & Company, publisher of The Wall Street Journal, for \$5 billion. In 2017, he agreed to sell most of the holdings of 21st Century Fox to the Disney Company. Two years later, the deal closed and was valued at about \$71 billion (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020).

In the US, Murdoch has played a central role in the evolution of both journalism and politics. His Fox News Channel has become a powerful force within Republican Party politics – and therefore all of American politics. The station has a dubious record for fairness, accuracy, and integrity, but it has proven to be a supremely powerful megaphone for Republican talking points (McChesney, 2014). When Murdoch agreed to sell 21st Century Fox, Trump called him to get his assurance that the Fox News Channel would not be affected (Chozick, 2017). Thus, hugely profitable Fox News and various other TV channels were excluded from the sale, and they became part of the newly formed Fox Corporation.

Fox News has had a profound effect on broadcast journalism in the US, thanks to the traditional Murdoch formula of sensationalism and entertainment employed in the pursuit of ratings and revenue (Brock, 2004; Greenwald, 2004). Presenters on Fox News abandoned journalistic traditions of objectivity and political neutrality (belied by the network’s Orwellian slogan, “fair and balanced”), employing instead a combative interview style (Halper and

Clarke, 2004: 185). Andrew Calabrese (2005) argues: “Murdoch’s Fox News set the standard for patriotic television with an editorial policy that echoed the Bush administration’s official stance, making any challenge to the White House’s plans for war seem tantamount to treason... While chasing after FOX in the ratings war, the other networks also shifted more closely towards FOX’s ideological terrain” (Hobbs, 2010).

Labelled the “FOX effect” by Iskandar (2005), Schechter (2003), Collins (2004) and Greenwald (2004), the editorial policies and journalistic formula at FOX have had a detrimental impact on America’s public sphere and media. Indeed, the “FOX effect” highlights quite well the potential problems posed by “infotainment,” with a number of studies showing the disproportionate level of misconceptions held by viewers of Fox News (Brock 2004; Halper and Clarke, 2004:193). Even in the post-invasion phase of the Iraq War, long after US forces failed to locate Saddam Hussein’s alleged hordes of biological and chemical weapons, 80 percent of FOX viewers held several misconceptions of the war and its justifications, including that the coalition found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and that Saddam Hussein orchestrated the September 11 terrorist attacks (Calabrese, 2005; Kull et al., 2003).

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Murdoch has been an integral force in reprogramming the media network, making the ability to mobilize public opinion a fundamental measure of power within the media environment. As Iskandar notes, “the arrival of Fox News Channel (FNC) has reinvented and reinvigorated partisanship in the press...”

Murdoch has been an integral force in reprogramming the media network, making the ability to mobilize public opinion a fundamental measure of power within the media environment. As Iskandar notes, “the arrival of Fox News Channel (FNC) has reinvented and reinvigorated partisanship in the press, thereby creating a model for its application in the broadcast realm” (Iskandar, 2005: 164). By lambasting other networks as too liberal and presenting itself as “fair and balanced,” FNC encouraged other networks to replicate its formula in order to remain competitive and to stave off criticisms of a liberal bias. Thus, by influencing public opinion in favour of the Iraq War, FNC not only strengthened its ties to the Bush administration, but it influenced the journalistic norms of rival outlets in support of a similar agenda – reprogramming the television media landscape as a whole (Arsenault & Castells, 2008).

Empirical evidence indicate that FNC played a critical role in mobilizing and sustaining public opinion in favour of the Iraq War and the Bush administration (Arsenault & Castells, 2006; Iskandar, 2005). This support benefited the administration, but it also benefited NewsCorp. Nielsen data documented a 288 percent increase in FNC audience share during the initial stages of the Iraq War (Ayeni, 2004:8). However, Fox News’ claims to be “fair and balanced” and to offer “real journalism” that lets the viewers decide (“we report, you decide”) are totally groundless. On the contrary, Fox News is a very conservative, pro-Republican network that does not separate commentary and news and that supports conservative politicians and policies far more openly than any other television network supports any politicians, liberal or conservative (Weaver, 2005).

Michael Wolff characterizes Fox News as “the ultimate Murdoch product,” because it brought tabloid journalism to American television (Wolff, 2008: 282). What has been missed in the equation is the business model of tabloid journalism: it means dispensing with actual reporting, which costs a lot of money to do well, and replacing it with far less expensive pontificating that will attract audiences. For a tabloid news channel, that means the value-added is by providing a colourful, partisan

take on the news (McChesney, 2014).

Research demonstrates that the more conservative media one consumes, the more likely they are to dismiss as liberal propaganda or lies, news or arguments that contradict the conservative position (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008: X, 240). Conservative media, led significantly by Fox News, marches in lock-step with the same talking points, the same issues, and even the same terminology deployed by the Republican party. They apply the core principles of advertising and propaganda. This has helped to galvanize and solidify the American right, making it more powerful than it would be otherwise (McChesney, 2014).

FOX and the conservative media can aggressively push stories, have Republican politicians echo them, and then badger the traditional media for having a “liberal bias” if they do not cover the stories as well. Because it believes it is fighting an uphill battle with liberal propagandists, Fox News can have an unabashed and breath-taking double standard, where they have very different evidentiary standards for stories that serve them versus stories that damage their politics. If facts prove inconvenient for the preferred narrative, ignore them (McChesney, 2014).

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Between the cocoon effect and the shameless disregard for consistency and intellectual honesty, it is not surprising that professional surveys tend to find regular viewers of Fox News to be more ignorant about what is actually happening in the world compared to those who watch other networks.



Signboard Fox News Channel at the News Corporation headquarters building in Manhattan, New York City.

In recent years, some Fox News hosts and guests have been moving ever closer to openly embracing the most bigoted sentiments of the white-nationalist movement. A few days before the antisemitic attack on a Pittsburgh synagogue that killed 11 Jewish worshipers on October 27, 2018, a guest on Lou Dobbs's show said that a migrant caravan headed to the US border from Honduras was being funded by the “Soros-occupied State Department.” The shooter, according to a post he made on social media, had come to believe that Jews were transporting members of the migrant caravans. When Tucker Carlson came under fire for his increasingly pointed attacks on immigration – “We have a moral obligation to admit the world's poor, they tell us, even if it makes our country poorer and dirtier and more divided” – he received personal text messages of support from Lachlan Murdoch (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019b).

Between the cocoon effect and the shameless disregard for consistency and intellectual honesty, it is not surprising that professional surveys tend to find regular viewers of Fox News to be more ignorant about what is actually happening in the world compared to those who watch other networks (PublicMind Poll, 2011). A 2007 study found that the introduction of the network on a particular cable system pushed local voters to the right: the Fox News Effect, as it became known. In a 2014 Pew Research poll, a majority of self-described conservatives said it was the only news network they trusted (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019a). The Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland conducted

a survey of American voters in 2010 that shows that Fox News viewers are significantly more misinformed than consumers of news from other sources (Howard, 2010).

For decades, Murdoch has used his media properties to establish a direct line to Australian and British leaders. But in the 44 years since he bought his first newspaper in the US, he had largely failed to cultivate close ties to an American president until Donald Trump's presidency. Murdoch and Trump – both forged in New York's tabloid culture, one as the owner of *The New York Post*, the other as its perfect subject – have travelled in the same circles since the 1970s. Although both men parlayed their inheritances into global power, they have stubbornly viewed themselves as outsiders at odds with the establishment (Chozick, 2017).

Prime ministers have danced to Murdoch's tune (Luce, 2018), but Trump is the first US president on whom he has personal influence (though Murdoch initially urged Mike Bloomberg to run for president against Trump) (Forbes, 2020). Having once dismissed Trump's candidacy, Murdoch later threw himself wholly behind it. During the final stretch of the campaign, Fox News cut back appearances by anti-Trump analysts and contributors and added pro-Trump ones, while also ramping up its attacks on Hillary Clinton. One anti-Clinton segment was built around an appearance by Jeff Rovin, who had for years been the editor in chief of *The Weekly World News*, the supermarket tabloid best known for claiming that Hillary Clinton was possessed by Satan and had carried on an affair with a space alien named P'Lod. Other Murdoch outlets were swinging behind Trump, too (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019a).

After the election, Murdoch moved even more forcefully to support Trump (Mahler & Rutenberg, 2019c). They talk weekly and sometimes daily. Trump takes his cues from *Fox & Friends*, the morning show that plays the same role in Trump's day as the presidential intelligence briefing did for his predecessors. Sometimes, Trump phones the show live (Luce, 2018). Trump enjoys getting Murdoch's calls. As someone who prizes wealth and power, Trump

had long admired Murdoch; for decades, it had invariably been Trump who called Murdoch, asking for help. Now, it was Murdoch reaching out to Trump on a regular basis (Mahler & Rutenberg, 2019c).

A Gallup–Knight Foundation survey (2018) found that 69 percent of Americans had lost trust in the news media over the previous decade. For Republicans, the figure was 94 percent. In the two decades since the networks founding, the Fox News Effect has never been more pronounced. A March study by Navigation Research, a Democratic firm, found that 12 percent of Fox News viewers believe that climate change is mostly caused by humans, compared with 62 percent of all other Americans. At the same time, 78 percent of FOX viewers believe that Trump has accomplished more than any president in American history, compared with 17 percent of other Americans (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019b). In return, the Murdoch approach to empire building has reached its apotheosis in the Trump era (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019a).

CONCLUSION

During his six decades in media, Rupert Murdoch has carefully built an image as a pragmatist who will support liberal governments when it suits him. Yet his various news outlets have inexorably pushed the flow of history to the right across the Anglosphere, whether they were advocating for the US and its allies to go to war in Iraq in 2003, undermining global efforts to combat climate change, or vilifying people of colour (at home or abroad) as dangerous threats to a white majority. The Murdoch dynasty draws no lines between politics, money, and power; they all work together seamlessly in service of the overarching goal of imperial expansion (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019a).

A six-month investigation by The New York Times covering three continents and including more than 150 interviews has described how the Murdoch family turned their media outlets into right-wing political influence machines that have destabilized democracy in North America, Europe, and Australia (Stack, 2019). Media power has historically accrued slowly, over the course of generations, which is one reason it tends to be concentrated in dynastic families. The Murdoch empire is a relatively young one, but it would be hard to argue that there is a more powerful media family on earth (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019a). However, the Murdoch family is not immune from internal conflicts and tensions, which reflect themselves in questions around succession. Succession has been a source of tension in the Murdoch family for years, particularly between Murdoch's sons Lachlan and James (Stack, 2019).

James and Lachlan are very different people, with very different politics, and they are pushing the company toward very different futures: James toward a globalized, multiplatform news-and-entertainment brand that would seem sensible to any attendee of Davos or reader of The Economist; Lachlan toward something at once out of the past and increasingly of the moment – an unabashedly nationalist, far-right, and hugely profitable political propaganda machine (Mahler, & Rutenberg, 2019a).

The Trump presidency also exposed a deeper divide between the brothers. James was becoming increasingly troubled by Fox News. He didn't object to the idea of a conservative news network, but he did object to what he felt it had evolved into at certain hours: a political weapon with no editorial standards or concern for the value of truth and a knee-jerk defender of the president's rhetoric and policies (Mahler & Rutenberg, 2019c).

After Trump issued his executive order banning immigration from some Muslim-majority countries in early 2017, James pushed his father and Lachlan to agree to write a companywide memo reassuring its Muslim employees in the United States and abroad. James wanted the note to forcefully and unequivocally establish their opposition to the policy and to tell employees

who felt threatened by it that the company would do everything in its power to protect them. Lachlan wanted it to be less confrontational and to not specifically mention Trump or the Muslim ban, which Fox News's opinion hosts were defending night after night (Mahler & Rutenberg, 2019c).

Months later, when Trump blamed “both sides” for the violence at a white-supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Va., saying that there were some “very fine people” among the white supremacists, James’ wife Kathryn insisted that they write their own open letter of opposition, without consulting with his brother or father first (Mahler & Rutenberg, 2019c). James and Kathryn were planning to devote some of their fortune to trying to neutralize James’ fathers’ media weapon. In early 2019, their foundation, Quadrivium, announced initiatives to defend democratic nations against what they saw as the rising threat of illiberal populism and to bolster voting rights (Mahler & Rutenberg, 2019b).

However, Murdoch’s choice for succession has made it clear that he doesn’t want his global media empire to change its right-wing populist route. Since Murdoch’s accident on Lachlan’s yacht in January 2018, the power structure inside NewsCorp has tilted toward Lachlan. According to The Australian’s former editor, Chris Mitchell, Lachlan is politically further to the right than his father. Lachlan is said to be a climate-change sceptic. This stands in sharp contrast to his brother, James, and Kathryn, who promote action on climate change. Lachlan also shares NewsCorp’s distaste for the elites, even though he belongs to the most rarefied of elites: the billionaire’s club in both Australia and the US (Davies, 2018d). It seems likely that the Murdoch Empire will continue to be a vehicle for promoting right-wing populism across the globe for the foreseeable future.



Lachlan Murdoch (L) and Sarah Murdoch attend the “mother!” premiere at Radio City Music Hall on September 13, 2017 in New York City.

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