

Amid the Murdoch scandal, there's an acrid smell of business as usual

Sunday 24 July 2011, by [PILGER John](#) (Date first published: 21 July 2011).

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The Fleet Street hacks and men from Westminster are now scrabbling to rewrite the history of the phone-hacking fiasco. The pact between press and parliament remains the same.

In *Scoop*, Evelyn Waugh's brilliant satire on the press, there is the moment when Lord Copper, owner of the *Daily Beast*, meets his new special war correspondent, William Boot, in truth an authority on wild flowers and birdsong. A confused Boot is ushered into his lordship's presence by Mr Salter, the Beast's foreign editor.

"Is Mr Boot all set for his trip?" "Up to a point, Lord Copper."

Copper briefs Boot as follows: "A few sharp victories, some conspicuous acts of personal bravery on the Patriot side and a colourful entry into the capital. That is the Beast policy for the war . . . We shall expect the first victory about the middle of July."

Rupert Murdoch is a 21st-century Lord Copper. The amusing gentility is missing; the absurdity of his power is the same. The *Daily Beast* wanted victories; it got them. The *Sun* wanted dead Argies; gotcha! Of the bloodbath in Iraq, Murdoch said: "There is going to be collateral damage, and if you really want to be brutal about it, better we get it done now . . ." The *Times*, the *Sunday Times*, Fox got it done.

Corporate monoculture

Long before it was possible to hack phones, Murdoch was waging a war on journalism, truth, humanity, and succeeded because he knew how to exploit a system that welcomed his devotion to the "free market". He may be more extreme in his methods, but he is no different in kind from many of those now lining up to condemn him who have been his beneficiaries, mimics, collaborators, apologists.

As Gordon Brown turns on his former master, accusing him of running a "criminal-media nexus", watch the palpable discomfort in the new parliamentary-media consensus. "We must not be backward-looking," said a Labour MP. Those parliamentarians caught two years ago with both hands in the Westminster till, who did nothing to stop the killing of hundreds of thousands of people in Iraq, and stood and cheered the war criminal responsible, are now "united" behind the "calm" figure of Ed Miliband. There is an acrid smell of business as usual.

Certainly, there is no “revolution”, as reported in the *Guardian*, which compared the fall of Murdoch with that of the tyrant Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania in 1989. The overexcitement is understandable; Nick Davies’s scoop is a great one. Yet the truth is, Britain’s system of elite monopoly control of the media rests not on News International alone, but on the Mail and the Guardian and the BBC, perhaps the most influential of all. All share a corporate monoculture that sets the agenda of the “news”, defines acceptable politics by maintaining the fiction of distinctive parties, normalises unpopular wars and guards the limits of “free speech”. This will be strengthened by the illusion that a “bad apple” has been “rooted out”.

When the *Financial Times* complained last September that the BSkyB takeover would give Murdoch dominance in Britain, the media commentator Roy Greenslade came to his rescue. “Surely,” he wrote, “Britain’s leading business newspaper should be applauding an entrepreneur who has achieved so much from unpromising beginnings?” Murdoch’s political control was a myth spread by “naive commentators”. Noting his own “idealism” about journalism, Greenslade made no mention of his history on the Sun, or as Robert Maxwell’s *Daily Mirror* editor responsible for the shameful smear that the miners’ leader Arthur Scargill was corrupt. (To his credit, he apologised in 2002.)

Greenslade is now a professor of journalism at City University, London. In his *Guardian* blog of 17 July, he caught the breeze and proposed that Murdoch explain “the climate you created”. How many of the political and media chorus now calling for Murdoch’s head remained silent over the years as his papers repeatedly attacked the most vulnerable in society? Impoverished single mothers have been a favourite target of tax-avoiding News International. Who in the so-called media village demanded the sacking of Kelvin MacKenzie as Sun editor following his attacks on the dead and dying in the Hillsborough stadium tragedy of 1989?

The kowtowing class

This was an episode as debased as the hacking of Milly Dowler’s phone, yet MacKenzie is frequently feted on the BBC and in the liberal press as a “witty” tabloid genius who “understands the ordinary punter”. Such vicarious middle-class flirtation with Wapping-life is matched by admiration for the successful Murdoch “marketing model”.

In Andrew Neil’s 470-page book *Full Disclosure*, the former editor of Murdoch’s *Sunday Times* devotes fewer than 30 words to the scurrilous and destructive smear campaign that he and his Wapping colleagues conducted against the broadcasters who made the 1988 Thames Television programme *Death on the Rock*. This landmark, fully vindicated investigation lifted the veil on the British secret state and exposed its ruthlessness under Margaret Thatcher, a confidante of Murdoch’s. Thereafter, Thames Television was doomed. Yet Neil has his own BBC programme and his views are sought after across the liberal media.

The *Guardian* of 13 July editorialised about “the kowtowing of the political class to the Murdochs”. This is all too true. Kowtowing is an ancient ritual, often performed by those whose pacts with power may not be immediately obvious, but are no less sulphuric. Tony Blair, soaked in the blood of an entire society, was once regarded almost mystically at the Guardian and Observer as the prime minister who, wrote Hugo Young, “wants to create a world none of us have known [where] the mind might range in search of a better Britain . . .” He was in perfect harmony with the chorus over at Wapping. “Mr Blair,” said the *Sun*, “has vision, he has purpose and he speaks our language on morality and family life.” Plus ça change.

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P.S.

* From the New Statesman. Published 21 July 2011:

<http://www.newstatesman.com/newspapers/2011/07/pilger-murdoch-media-press>