

which means that a newspaper or television news division is one component of a chain of business ventures that may also include fast food and computers, sports teams and book publishing. These connections cannot fail to constrain the investigative ambitions of editors or journalists, who fall under enormous pressures to exhibit corporate loyalty. Few administrations or city governments would be so stupid as to penalize a paper directly for an offensive investigation, but there are a hundred ways of striking at a parent or related company in the broader corporate family, the *keiretsu* circle.

In the last decade, complaints about the media have often focused on the figure of Rupert Murdoch, "Citizen Cain," who has been blamed for virtually every lapse of taste and editorial judgment in any newspaper or television program. The criticism is often exaggerated, and it is humorous to see Murdoch described as an interloper in what (it sometimes appears) the Constitution presumably intended to be solely a three-ring circle of television networks: two generations of successful greed can give an enterprise staggering pretensions, to say nothing of delusions of invulnerability. But the Murdoch empire has enjoyed staggering growth worldwide. In America alone, this includes a host of newspapers, from the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the *San Antonio Express-News* to the *Star*; Fox Broadcasting and a national television network with almost 200 affiliates; major shares in Harper & Row and *TV Guide*; and satellite and cable networks. All this in addition to growing ventures on every continent except Africa.

In terms of news, the Murdoch presence has been blamed for a precipitous decline in journalistic standards and the rise of unashamedly sensationalistic reporting. This tendency could be illustrated by a hundred news headlines, but two nice examples would be "Werewolf Seized in Southend," a

front-page banner from the *Sun*, Britain's best-selling daily; and "Headless Body Found in Topless Bar," a relatively mild contribution from the *New York Post*. Again, this is somewhat unfair in that all the television networks share some blame for the drift to tabloid standards, and Murdoch's enterprises can scarcely be blamed for the talk shows and trash television that provide news and social commentary for so large a majority of the American people. Murdoch is less important as an individual culprit than as a powerful symbol of the thorough transformation of news into entertainment, the necessary corollary of the failure of the media to provide effective or substantial analysis of politics and the state. Nor can *USA Today* be attacked for its valiant efforts to reduce any story to the visual equivalent of a 30-second sound-bite. Like Murdoch, it is reflecting the conditions of a profoundly nonideological age, when most people have come to believe that the doings of the state are so far-removed from anything they can understand, still less control, that it is pointless making the effort.

There are adversarial media in this country, on both the left and the right, and across the spectra of sexual and religious preference, and some of them do a quite heroic job, but their influence is heavily circumscribed. For what we still describe as the mainstream, however, the most likely fate is what we might call a British solution. In the Britain of the 1980's, the Murdoch press led the way toward a thorough exclusion of serious news from the press, on the reasonable grounds that investigative reporting tended to annoy the government and the courts, while huge amounts of money were to be made in page-three nudes and silly headlines: "Werewolf Seized in Southend," "Rape Hell in Satan's Coven." After all, that's entertainment. It may also be our future.

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## Obituary in the *New York Times*

by William Baer

Today I read the notice of a death  
buried deep within the *New York Times*.  
Concise and brief, just 87 words,  
it read, I knew, *exactly* like my own.  
Some unknown man, my age, who'd died of cancer—  
and I wondered if his children ever called,  
and if his late divorce had left the woman  
as bitter and unforgiving as my first wife.

I wondered if his "freedom" was empty and cold,  
and if he had more wealth than he could need—  
and if he had sometime, just recently,  
discovered that most all of what he'd said  
and thought, throughout his life, was totally wrong.  
And as I feel the cancer surge within,  
I wonder if the same kind took him down.

# Mass Media, Mass Conformity

by Erwin Knoll



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

I take a certain amount of gleeful satisfaction—the Germans call it *Schadenfreude*—in the schisms and divisions that seem increasingly to bedevil the American right. The pitched battles between neoconservatives and paleoconservatives, between libertarians and authoritarians, and, of late, between social conservatives of the fundamentalist Christian persuasion and traditional economic royalists who care much more about unearned income than about unborn infants—all of these squabbles suggest that the American right, which seemed to be giddily on the ascendant only a decade or so ago, has a long way to go before it can establish the ideological hegemony it so passionately craves. And, from my perspective, that is a very good thing.

But my almost obsessive interest in the nasty family feuds reported by sundry right-wing publications suggests that there is one deeply held conviction, one fundamental assumption, one bedrock principle to which every conservative faction and subset subscribes: the notion that America's most grievous problems are caused, or at least seriously exacerbated, by the mass media, which are mysteriously but intractably biased in favor of the left.

I, too, believe that the mass media bear a considerable burden of responsibility for what ails America, but I am at a loss to comprehend how anyone could possibly place them on the left of the political spectrum. I wish at least some of them were, so that our society could experience the benefits of genuinely adversarial journalism. I wish there were mass-circulation daily newspapers, or weekly news magazines, or television networks,

or commercial radio stations that brought to their news coverage the kind of antiestablishment insight that informs the struggling, small-circulation publications of the American left—the *Nation*, *The Progressive*, *In These Times*, *Mother Jones*. I wish the many millions of Americans who glance at morning newspapers or doze off while watching the evening news had an occasional opportunity to be exposed to an alternative viewpoint that challenges the fundamental assumptions of Washington's often-benighted foreign policy or of the profit-driven market system. But that is decidedly not the case.

If there ever was a time when real debate on fundamental ideological questions was fostered and stimulated by the mass media in our country, it ended with the advent of the Cold War. The exigencies of the nuclear age, the perils of America's confrontation with Soviet communism, made it imperative, we were told, that "politics stop at the water's edge." This put foreign and military policy—literally matters of life and death—beyond the pale. Critical media scrutiny was verboten, and public debate, when it existed at all, was inevitably uninformed and invariably unwelcome. And the media, which often engage in lofty flights of rhetoric about their devotion to the First Amendment, eagerly embraced this drastic limitation not only on their freedom but on their essential function. They became devoted and obedient servants of the official line—as obedient as their counterparts in the communist camp, who at least made no pretense of independence.

Let me illustrate first with a personal experience that marked the beginning of my understanding of the realities of American journalism. It was the spring of 1960, and I was a young reporter on the local news staff of the *Washington Post*. Across the world, the Russians had just shot down an American U-2 spy

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