

## Citizen Murdoch

If Rupert Murdoch gets his way, all Earthlings will read one newspaper and watch one television station. And Murdoch will own both. So even before the Media Monster That Ate New York and London had the *Wall Street Journal* for dessert, the liberal-media elite flew into a rage worthy of the Tasmanian Devil. *He'll interfere*, they bayed. *He'll wreck the newsroom*, they barked. *He'll put profits before good journalism*, they brayed. Whether any or all of these calamities come to pass, the liberal-media elites, as one would expect, opposed Murdoch's acquisition of the *Journal* for the wrong reasons.

Murdoch's News Corporation is a globe-straddling, eye-popping behemoth: It owns FOX News, the *Times* of London, the *Australian*, as well as myriad smaller companies too numerous to mention. Murdoch also owns the book publisher HarperCollins. The whole kit and caboodle is worth some \$70 billion. If you wanted to prove Balzac's maxim that a crime lies behind every immense fortune, Murdoch's bazillion-dollar media kingdom would be a good place to sniff around.

Owned by the Bancroft family, Dow Jones is the century-old company that publishes the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Ottawa* dailies, and *Barron's*. The *Journal* also owns its share of Pulitzer prizes and is deservedly regarded as the best brand name in financial journalism. Like FOX News, its editorial page is a neoconservative megaphone that barks and bellows for globalism, free trade, and open borders. For years, the page whipped Bill Clinton like a red-headed stepchild, and it gained a richly deserved reputation for slugging crackpot leftist Democrats upside the head. No wonder leftist crackpots everywhere loathe it.

To mute the tocsin about "meddling," Murdoch agreed to establish an independent panel to keep an eye on things, lest he turn the *Journal's* newsroom into an arm of its insane editorial page. How that will shake out remains to be seen, but, in any event, the worries over Murdoch's owning the *Journal* fall into two categories: legitimate and ridiculous.

Murdoch already uses his media power to influence public officials, domes-

tic and foreign—which is a legitimate cause for worry. In 2003, Congress considered a regulation that would have required Murdoch to sell some properties. As the *New York Times* reported, one man who was behind the new rule was Sen. Trent Lott (R-MS), an alleged conservative. Then Lott changed his mind. HarperCollins had paid Senator Lott \$250,000 in advance royalties for his unheralded book, *Herding Cats*. Before that, Murdoch's publishing house had offered a \$4.5 million advance to House Speaker Newt Gingrich, which precipitated such vehement reproach that Gingrich returned it.

The most scandalous of Murdoch's monkeyshines occurred in China. When he publicly proclaimed that modern media "proved an unambiguous threat to totalitarian regimes everywhere," the Chinese Reds banned private ownership of satellite dishes, which threatened Murdoch's Asian broadcasting venture, Star TV. No problem. HarperCollins published Deng Xiaoping's biography, which, according to Joseph Kahn of the *New York Times*, included "mainly recycled propaganda about Mr. Deng." Murdoch schmoozed with Deng's handicapped son as well. He "chartered a jet to ferry a troop of disabled acrobats that the younger Mr. Deng had promoted to perform abroad." And Star TV dumped the BBC because the Chicomos didn't like its newscasts. That should worry journalists everywhere.

On the other hand, the relentless, daffy propaganda that Murdoch might "meddle" in the *Journal's* newsroom is ridiculous. Whether Murdoch is already prone to wander from office to office depends on which of his editors you listen to. The fear of Murdoch's vaticinated meddling runs something like this, from leftist Eric Alterman of Media Matters for America:

On the day the takeover bid was announced, I appeared on CNBC's "Kudlow and Company" and heard the claim, made over and over, that a Murdoch-owned Wall Street Journal might somehow even out the balance of *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Washington*

*Post*, etc.

The point is misguided in myriad directions simultaneously. First off, those papers all have objective-seeking journalists doing the news, not liberals as Kudlow was implying.

This, of course, is a jug of pink moonshine, but it's typical of the leftists for whom objectivity means a sinister view of the world.

Murdoch's critics might not want to gabble about "meddling" and ethics, either. Murdoch may be unethical, but he's no more so than his competitors. The same worrywarts said nothing when the publisher of the *New York Times*, Arthur Sulzberger, flatly declared that "diversity," as opposed to accuracy, is the "most important issue facing the paper." That bit of interference—which was also unethical—led to Jayson Blair's plagiarism and fabrication fiasco. Indeed, the newsroom's managing editor, Howell Raines, admitted that he overlooked Blair's transgressions because Blair is black. The worrywarts said nothing when the Pulitzer Prize Board refused to revoke, and the *Times* refused to return, Walter Duranty's award, which he won for his flatly mendacious reportage from Stalin's Soviet Union. Or how about this: The *Times* hatched a real-estate deal with the state of New York to condemn and seize a property, subsidized by taxpayers to the tune of \$79 million, for its 52-story corporate headquarters. No worries there.

And what might they say if they saw Donald Graham "meddling" in newsroom decisions the way his mother did during the *Washington Post's* coverage of the Watergate and Pentagon Papers stories? Katharine Graham rightly participated in decisions about those stories, and, should such a story present itself to the *Journal*, Murdoch might rightly participate as well.

In the abstract, it is absurd for Murdoch's critics to argue that someone who paid five billion dollars for a company cannot run it the way he sees fit. (Then again, liberals aren't much on private-property rights, as we know from 50 years of editorials from the *New York Times*.)

But no man needs this much money or power. Observed James B. Ottaway, a Dow Jones director and a former owner of the Ottaway chain,

I am opposed to Rupert Murdoch's buying Dow Jones to boost his personal prestige, political power, and global media business control. . . . [Murdoch's] taking over Dow Jones . . . would add to already too much concentration of American and global media ownership, and political influence on American society and government decision making.

One wonders why Ottaway sold his papers to Dow Jones, for that, too, concentrated media power in fewer hands. Nonetheless, Ottaway and others made an even more salient point: Wealthy beyond the wildest dreams of 99 percent of their readers, the Bancroft Family had neither good reason nor the need to sell Dow Jones.

Ottaway wrongly believes Murdoch's News Corporation differs substantially from the other massive media plantations that dominate the landscape. The truth is that News Corporation is the same, only bigger. The sad tragedy of American jour-

nalism has been the near-complete eradication of locally or family-owned, small-town dailies. A few gargantuan media companies own many of them—most notably, that hideous Gorgon of anti-American corporate leftism, Gannett. Gannett's journalistic crimes aside, it suffices to say that the owners of a paper in Iowa should not live in New York, anymore than the owners of the *Baltimore Sun* should reside in Chicago or Denver or wherever the Tribune Company's directors and major stockholders live. Most of them have no interest in or knowledge of the communities their papers "serve."

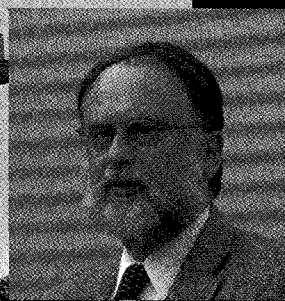
This is the irony of the news media's operation in the free market. With complete freedom to expand, a few companies such as Gannett devoured local dailies by the bushel. So consumers from Portland East to Portland West get their news from faceless, nonlocal media conglomerates that hire nonlocal editors and writers, whose political, religious, and cultural beliefs, which surface in stories and editorials, are often hostile to the community's. Given that starting a daily newspaper is financially impossible for anyone but Bill Gates or Warren Buffett, the only alternative for locals is a newspaper on the web. Of course, media giants

create those, too. A few large corporations control too many newspapers and dominate the media landscape. Strangely, the liberals who despise Wal-Mart are not discussing the gigantism and raw power that Murdoch's insidious accumulation of media properties means. Perhaps they do not care, which might be why they don't complain about Tribune or Gannett. The selective criticism reeks of hypocrisy. Liberals don't oppose concentrated power or influence peddling; they oppose only Murdoch.

And only because of his alleged ideology. Well, then, here is a news flash: Murdoch isn't the conservative the liberal Pecksniffs think he is. No conservative would put naked women on Page Three of his newspapers, or produce ribald television programs such as *Married With Children*, or jump into bed with the Chicoms. Nor would a conservative donate money to Sens. Hillary Clinton and Charles Schumer. Murdoch has done it all. His London tabloid, the *Sun*, endorsed leftist Tony Blair. His FOX News Channel is a shill for the Bush administration. Murdoch uses, and will continue to use, his billions to wield power in politics and government. In short, like William Randolph Hearst, he is a public menace. <C>

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