

Insights from the Moguls of Media Capitalism - A Review Essay

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Abstract: In printed media, not only do newspapers play a key role but also its editors and, perhaps even more so, the owners of these newspapers. Those are the ones who Beecher calls *media moguls*. Among the handful of newspaper proprietors, Rupert Murdoch is not only the most infamous but also the most notorious. Beecher, who was once an editor for Murdoch, delivers an inside view of the internal affairs of Murdoch's news empire. This includes not only Murdoch's activities in the UK and Australia, but also in the USA. In the USA, for example, Fox has become a propaganda apparatus for Trump. Yet, long before Trump moved from being a sleazy TV host into politics and having received the support of Murdoch, Murdoch's far right influence into politics were felt most sharply in Murdoch's home country of Australia as well as the UK. Murdoch's phone hacking, his relentless and tremendous support for UK Tories and Brexit are examples that explain the power triangle between Murdoch's media, voters, and politics. Murdoch has created something that might best be called the *Iron Triangle of Media Capitalism*. How this works is explained here.

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Under *capitalism*, many media outlets are run by large global media corporations. This is one ingredient a particular form of capitalism that might best be called *media capitalism* (Ali 2022) needs. Under capitalism, such corporations are headed by a CEO – a chief executive officer. While in the case of media corporations, these corporate bosses have taken on elements of what Persians, Arabs, and Indians call, a *mogul* (Beecher 2024). Among the many moguls the world has seen, the Mongol ruler Genghis Khan remains the most feared and most villainous. And indeed, some of today's *media moguls* depict characteristics of the ruthless, merciless, conquering, and plundering Genghis Khan.

With this in mind, Beecher's highly illuminating book is based on decades of working in the corporate media, particularly inside Rupert Murdoch's *Global Propaganda Machine* (Brock 2012; Watson & Hickman 2012; Young 2023). Self-evidently, it starts with "The Moguls". This is followed by "Moguldom", "Power", "Malfeasance", and "The Future". The book ends with an "Afterword". But before all that, it needs to be acknowledged that "the abuse of journalism by media moguls isn't a new story" (p. 4). Perhaps ever since Bakan's seminal "The Corporation" (2004), many have known that corporate power is often callously used against those without power. At times, it even follows the Athenian general *Thucydides* who once said, the *strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must*.

This abuse of media power (Waldman 2021) includes “the cumulative damage inflicted on liberal democracies by owners of journalism who place profits and power ahead of civic responsibility and decency” (p. 5). Perhaps capitalism, media companies, and media moguls do not need democracy. Media moguls aren’t bending democracy directly, but they surely are ‘bending the truth for profits’ (p. 6).

Quite apart from tabloids like Murdoch’s right-wing and salacious “The Sun” (UK), the “New York Post” (USA), and the “Daily Telegraph” (Australia), there are, as it is rather common under monopoly capitalism, “two giant platforms, namely, [Murdoch’s] Fox News and [Elon Musk’s] Twitter/X, [that] disseminate more false ‘news’ than any outlet in any previous era” (p. 8). Beyond that, and even beyond the immediate profit maxim, media moguls do that “to provide vigorous support [...] for the capitalist system in [their] company’s newspapers” (p. 21) and other media outlets they own. The whole enterprise of media capitalism (Artz 2024) operates under the following equation (p. 23):

“titillating journalism = mass audiences = abundant advertising revenue = vast profits = political power”

With this formula, the *iron triangle of media capitalism* (Széll 2022) works its magic. Such an abridged, shorthanded, simplified, and highly condensed triangle works something like this: media corporations (M) have the power to influence people’s attitudes, worldviews, opinions, etc. Yet, they may even influence society (S) as a whole. In turn, people tend to elect politicians according to their – media infused or otherwise – worldviews. These elected politicians then shape parliamentary outcomes, i.e., laws, rules, and regulations. What lawmakers decide in parliaments largely determines the affairs of democratic states. These democratic states (S) – and this is to close the “MSS” triangle – wholly support capitalism and media corporations (M) through a pro-business agenda, pro-business rules, deregulations, state subsidies, tax concessions, and so on.

Next to rampant consumerism, media entertainment and deceptive propaganda on a massive scale (Horkheimer and Adorno 1944; Enzensberger 1974; Chomsky 1991) have entrapped people inside the ideologies provided to them. Almost exactly eighty years ago, German philosopher pair of Horkheimer and Adorno (1944, 12) said something about the defining element of the impact of such a media induced ideology that still rings true today,

“immovably, they insist on the very ideology that enslaves them”.

Empirical evidence for the asphyxiation of society inside media capitalism comes from none other than Donald Trump (Stelter 2020). Without Murdoch’s Fox News, there would never have been a President Trump; without Murdoch’s “Sun” there might never have been a Brexit (Klikauer 2016); and, without the corporate mass-media there might never have been a Victor Orbán (Fuster 2023). Yet, the most telling evidence comes from Italy’s all media domineering figure of Silvio *Berlusconi who used the power of the media to shape politics* (Ginsborg 2005).

To secure election outcome through the MSS triangle, “news moguls” (p. 61) do not shy away from applying every dirty trick in the book – from lying, to deception, to phone hacking (Kellner 2012). To camouflage this, many gullible academics (Baritz 1960) have been made to believe in handy ideologies like, for example, business ethics, corporate social responsibility, and corporate citizenship. Meanwhile, media moguls

“have intimidated governments, invaded personal privacy, peddled mistruths, stirred up sensationalism, dispensed patronage, denigrated their enemies, twisted social values, and in the process accumulated obscene fortunes” (p. 62).

On those occasions when the views of editor (read: *journalistic integrity*) collide with those of their media moguls (read: *sensationalism and profits*), one of the moguls’ preferred solutions was once outlined rather pointedly. It came during a “1947 Royal Commission on the Press” (p. 80). When a media mogul was “asked what happened when his editors disagreed with his view he said, *I talked them out of it*” (p. 80). Simple but effective. In corporate media, not truth but power talks (Lukes 1974).

At times, these media moguls go into overdrive becoming, not proprietors of news, but “true national propagandists” (p. 158). In one case, this meant “sending his editors 147 directives in a single day” (p. 159). Such media moguls can and do “weaponise [their] newspapers with a vendetta [even] against prime minister[s]” (p. 160). In other words, media moguls “set the topics, dictated the tone, and directed many of the editorials in [their] papers” (p. 161).

Meanwhile, other media moguls operate slightly differently. “In 2023, when transcripts of Murdoch’s emails to his Fox News” emerged, it showed that on Fox’s infamous *fair and balanced* (sic!), Fox News not only “supported Trump’s election” (p. 166) but it also showed that “Murdoch doesn’t issue ‘daily orders’ to editors [...] he doesn’t need to” (p. 166). Murdoch’s editors know what to do and show *pre-emptive submission* – or as the historian Timothy Snyder (2021) calls it, *anticipatory obedience* – to the will of the media mogul. This is even clearer as “Murdoch leaves his underlings in no doubt as to what he really thinks” (p. 167). In other words, his lackeys know what to do.

It got only worse with “the world’s newest media mogul, Elon Musk, [who] has elevated intervention to a whole new level of flagrance” (p. 167). His Twitter/X online platform “offers a haven to far-right influencers and advances the interests, prejudices, and conspiracy theories of the right wing of American politics” (p. 175). In other words, “the idea that editorial freedom can operate uninhibited inside a media dictatorship is a mirage” (p. 176). Yet, this also means that “freedom of the press [...] is guaranteed only to those who own one” (p. 176). A key element of the concept of media capitalism can hardly be better expressed than in this statement.

Meanwhile, the idea of media capitalism’s iron triangle is expressed almost to perfection in the fact that “any great newspaper [...] can enforce policies or make or unmake governments at will” (p. 179). In short, media moguls can make or break governments. Worse, “political leaders in democracies are transfixed by media coverage, they are easy prey for moguls” (p. 180). It gets worse when “prime ministers [...] were so scared of blackmail by headline they gave him [Murdoch] whatever he asked” (p. 181). To the unsuspecting outsider and politically naïve, it appears as if prime ministers have all the power. In reality, they give media moguls whatever they ask for.

Not surprisingly, the sheer power of “the barons of the media” (p. 181) virtually assures that “prime ministers quail before them” (p. 182). As for prime ministers, political parties, and other political lackeys, the media mogul Murdoch said, “*simple[...] I told him: look you can have a ‘headline a day or a bucket of shit every day. What’s it to be?’*” (p. 184). Under media capitalism, politicians have a free choice between a favourable headline or, as Murdoch said, “*a bucket of shit every day*”.

Worse, “newspapers [tend] ‘to stalk and seek to destroy a public man who would not bend to his [the media mogul’s] will’” (p. 187). Out of this fear and enforced quest for favourable coverage “the pantomime of power [demands for a] prime minister to

pay an obligatory visit to the home or office of” (p. 191) the media mogul. Yet, pitching up in the boss’s office is only the first step for prime ministers. In an even more telling case, “his newspapers had ‘single-handedly put the present government in office’, he [the media mogul] said about the prime minister, *‘if they don’t straighten up, we’ll bloody well get rid of them’*” (p. 201). In short, under media capitalism, the media puts politicians in, and the media takes politicians out. In the iron triangle of media capitalism, this is the *media* → *society/voter* link. In the second leg is *state* → *media*. And it works like this:

“No politician in history helped Rupert Murdoch as much, or for as long, as his conservative fellow traveller Margaret Thatcher. It was a mutual admiration society that operated for a decade, starting in 1981 when Thatcher intervened to help Murdoch buy The Times and Sunday Times without regulatory approval [...] A few years later the playbook was repeated when the Thatcher government green-lit Murdoch’s purchase of Today, his fifth UK national newspaper, without “scrutiny [...] We look like having another pro-Margaret newspaper’ [the media mogul] told Thatcher” (p. 206).

This puts meat to the bone of media capitalism and its iron triangle. Yet, things get even better on the second leg of the iron triangle of *state* → *media*. “Murdoch’s final gift from Thatcher [was the] approval for his Sky satellite TV to merge with its rival BSkyB [...] arrived a few days before she resigned as prime minister in 1990 [...] this gave Murdoch an unprecedentedly dominant position in the British media” (p. 207). This also closes the iron triangle. Murdoch assured that Thatcher was elected and re-elected – twice. In return, Thatcher (the state) gave the media mogul more media outlets and more power to make sure Thatcher remained in power for eleven long years.

Yet, the entire setup works on both sides of politics as the UK example shows. “The price of Rupert Murdoch’s support for Tony Blair was that Blair promised he would not take us into the European currency without first having a referendum [...] and if Rupert Murdoch had not done that, we would have joined the Euro in 1999, and I doubt Brexit would have happened” (p. 213). In other words, the media mogul Murdoch was by no means unconnected to the UK leaving the European Union (Klikauer 2023).

Virtually, the same applies to the USA where “Rupert used the editorial page and every other page necessary to elect Ronald Reagan president” (p. 215). And if the *carrot* does not work when dictating to democratically elected politicians the will of the media mogul, the media mogul can always apply the *stick* in the form of a *bucket of shit every day*. In this strategy, for example, the “bargaining chip [is that an] unsavoury story would be suppressed in return for something just as juicy” (p. 225). Not surprisingly, there are “stories about safes in the offices of Murdoch’s editors filled with dossiers on the private lives of politicians and competing businessmen” (p. 226). This can be used against politicians at will. But those *dirt files* can also be kept safe to blackmail politicians. For editors, all this means is that “the modus operandi sycophanta inside News Corp was [once] described by Andrew Neil, who edited the Sunday Times for Murdoch. ‘You are not a director or a manager or an editor: you are a courtier at the court of the Sun King’” (p. 234). The Sun King is the media mogul who publishes sleaze for profits, has a reactionary political attitude, and stabilises capitalism.

In other words, “for a media magnate armed with money, empire, influence, ego and a taste for power, there’s an obvious attraction in wanting to play on the biggest stage of all, politics” (p. 249). While gullible academics still believe that the *raison d’être* of

democracy is Rousseau's *volonté générale*, media capitalism has moved on. For the media moguls who sit on "both levers of power – journalism and politics" (p. 253), it simply is a means to get more power and more wealth. This is where capitalism and the press meet. The almost logical outcome for all this has been described by the staunchly neoliberal magazine *The Economist* by calling it "in its powerful 2011 cover story [of Murdoch] 'The Man who Screwed an Entire Country'" (p. 259). The point is not to screw an entire country but to enrich oneself while stabilizing capitalism. Both are not unconnected to conservative and far right populist political parties (Reagan, Thatcher, Trump, Orbán, Duterte, Bolsonaro, and the master of it all, Berlusconi who "controlled 90 per cent of all Italian national television broadcasting" (p. 260).

Beyond all that, media moguls know that "people are totally gullible" (p. 262). Working also in favour of media moguls and media capitalism is the fact that some academics still have what might be called *Intellectual Self-Defense* (Baillargeon 2007). Yet not everyone is an academic but they – subconsciously – infer that everyone has it. That many voters do not have *Intellectual Self-Defense* is shown in the elections of Reagan, Thatcher, Trump, Orbán, Duterte, Bolsonaro, Berlusconi, Modi, etc. Worse, media moguls "are feared. Everyone knows who they are. No-one wants to cross them [...] [and they are] unconstrained by society's rules and conventions" (p. 265).

Having left society's conventions behind, media moguls are free to claim, "we don't report the news, we make it," (p. 294). It is hard to sum up the power of media propaganda any better. An even better example of leaving society's rules behind comes from Murdoch himself. After his phone hacking criminality came to light, he donated \$1 million to Milly Dowler. It was "a donation that constituted 0.011 per cent of News Corp's revenues at the time and had 'PR' stamped all over it" (p. 253). So much for business ethics, corporate social responsibility, and corporate philanthropy.

It is not surprising to see that Murdoch's "News of the World, is known by local hacks as the 'Screws of the World'" (p. 370). This is what media moguls do, screw the world and present it as *corporate philanthropy* particularly when their business is "crime, greed, and sex" (p. 379) as well as "illegally hacking into personal voicemails, bribing police officers, stirring up racism and homophobia, condoning election, and climate denial" (p. 384).

Under Citizen Kane (Hutnyk 2014) – otherwise known as *William Randolph Hearst* – media power was driven to perfection. It "was almost as if he ran a government, rather than a media organisation" (p. 409). At times, corporate media do run governments. They do so indirectly and via media power. How public opinion can be manipulated was later shown by Murdoch when, shortly before the invasion of Iraq – for no weapons of mass destruction – "every one of News Corp's 175 newspapers across the globe supported the invasion – except one [...] the Hobart Mercury [but soon a] sharp memo arrived from head office [...] the Mercury swiftly U-turned" (p. 425).

Worse, "Fox has been the 'greatest promoter of climate change disinformation over the past two decades'" (p. 429). Much of this operates with a simple maxim, "Make the lie big, make it simple, keep saying it, and eventually they will believe it" (p. 474). This is further spiced up as the language of media moguls "has two complementary functions in the propaganda TV toolkit: entertainment and resentment" (p. 492).

Murdoch's story continued with the COVID-19 pandemic that "was rated gold for [his] propaganda network, offering the chance to peddle conspiracy theories, undermine government health advice, threaten an economic collapse, all laced with threats to personal freedom amid growing state power" (p. 502). At the same time "Rupert Murdoch was one of the first people in the world to receive a COVID

vaccination” (p. 505). Cynicism paired with resentment means, let them believe COVID is a fake, I get my COVID shot!

Yet, even before COVID-19, things were good for Murdoch as “over five years from 2014 to 2019, the company generated revenues of \$9 billion and profits of \$476 million – yet paid tax of just \$5.7 million” (p. 526). This is 1.2% of tax which is a tax rate way above those who read and see Murdoch’s propaganda. While always on the go to lower taxes, “four of the five wealthiest people in the world in early 2023 – Bernard Arnault, Elon Musk, Gautam Adani, and Jeff Bezos – held controlling stakes in big media companies in the US, India, and France” (p. 575). And this does not even include Zuckerberg’s *Facebook* covering “2.8 billion out of 8 billion” (p. 642) people living on earth. Hillary Clinton said about Zuckerberg, “I feel like you’re negotiating with a foreign power sometimes,” she said” (p. 643). In the end, “the function of the press in society is to inform, but its role is to make money” (p. 699).

In the end, Beecher’s most insightful, amusing and enjoyable to read, exquisitely argued and superbly written book on *The Men Who Killed the News* is so much more than a book about media moguls. Behind the most illuminating insights presented by Beecher, who was, after all, working for Murdoch, lurks the ugly face of media capitalism. The structure behind Beecher’s media moguls is the structure of media power that can shape and influence – evil heretics might say “manipulate” – public opinion (Bernays 1928; Asch 1955). This, in turn, shapes people’s attitudes.

Yet, these are the people who also vote. They vote for people who govern. These government make laws and issue regulations that, support media moguls through a favourable tax regime, the deregulation of labour law, financial support in the form of subsidies, etc. This supports media moguls who, in turn, assure that pro-business political parties are elected. As the father of Rupert Murdoch – Keith Murdoch – once said about an elected prime minister, “*I put him there, and I’ll put him out*” (Klikauer & Young 2021) – a testament of the enduring powers of those Beecher calls *media moguls*.

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