

GUEST ARTICLES

After the Murdoch Affair: A Better Ethics?¹

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*‘Trying to determine what is going on in the world
by reading newspapers is like trying to tell the time
by watching the second hand of the clock’.
(Ben Hetch, quoted in the Associated Press)*

The wiretapping scandal that overwhelmed Rupert Murdoch’s News of the World in the United Kingdom raises the unanswered question, what is the true nature of news reporting? More specifically, are reported news a commodity or a cultural product? Therefore, should reported news respond to strictly economic principles or to something else?

If news reporting is a market product whose ultimate aim is to sell newspapers, then one of the most important criteria will be its ability to attract readers and boost sales, the priority being to capture readers’ favour by meeting their expectations and preferences. The yardstick changes if, on the other hand, news reporting is aimed at spreading information and improving knowledge, and at offering professional, in-depth investigation. In the latter case, news reporting no longer has to dazzle or amaze no matter what; it must stick as much as possible to facts, even when they are unglamorous; the reporter’s task is to make such news understandable and complete.

There are, of course, many gradations between these two extremes, but the key question stands: to which of these two poles, should the nature of news reporting be closer? To rephrase, which goal should the good publisher, the good editor, the good journalist aim: to ever-increasing

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sales or to striving to contribute to public knowledge and civic consciousness and to strengthen the readers' ability to understand and interpret events and their complexity and ramifications?

The difference between these two extremes is all too evident. In the first case, the news will take their own independent life, regardless of the facts; or, in a more refined version, one true aspect of the story will be embellished and blown out of proportion to construe some appealing theory that catches the audience's imagination and makes people rush to the newsstand to buy the paper. In the opposite case, the news will respond to facts and possibly include in-depth analyses, expert opinions and comments that will contribute to understanding and will help to bring out meanings and to widen the scope of the analysis. In this second case, sources must be consulted, the findings compared and their accuracy verified. In short, hard work must be done not simply to please readers but, above all, to honour the loyalty pact signed with them when the journalist decided to embrace this profession.

So, which of these two conceptions is more rewarding in terms of consensus? As the statistics clearly show, definitely the first one. In terms of circulation, newspapers that publish rumours and fantasies far oversell others, which in many cases, to keep sales up, appear to increase the amount of superficiality in their reporting at the expense of good journalism. As a consequence, gossip becomes paramount, engendering a vicious circle (for some virtuous) whereby gossip and wild speculation encourage further rumours in competitive pursuit of circulation, sales and advertising contracts; a race fully justified, after all, precisely by this kind of journalism as it does, in fact, pay in terms of audience and income. More explicitly, the use of immoderate gossip becomes a mighty weapon as it gives increasing power to make instrumental choices. Once on this path, it becomes difficult to get out.

According to Forbes, Murdoch is the world's richest and most powerful publisher. He is the 122nd richest man in the world with a fortune estimated at \$7.2 billion and the capacity to reach 4.7 billion people (three quarters of the world population) every day. In order to maintain such primacy and continue to beat competitors, he has chosen to push the game to the extreme.

The name 'Murdoch' encompasses all his decision-making staff. There is an ongoing judicial process and we will have to let the British judiciary do its job. Still, it is clear and indisputable that, regardless of individual responsibilities, the tycoon's group has stepped far over the line in order to give its readers what they wanted. In this affair the audience has played a specific role, which is not necessarily that of the victim. It could even be said that Murdoch's

readers have been his accomplices for, by showing their interest through circulation, they have encouraged the paper to pursue the wildest kind of journalism. Readers were crazy about the *News of the World's* scoops. In order to remain faithful to its fame and give its paying pets new emotions, the paper did not hesitate to tap thousands of phones and private mails, including those of politicians, actors, sports personalities and ordinary people who had had the misfortune to become newsworthy. The whole affair involved a network of complicity that the current investigation is gradually unravelling, in the process making the upper floors of many respected and important institutions shake.

The Murdoch system functioned like a perfectly tuned clockwork. No part of the system could complain, for each got what it wanted- money, fame, power, access to intimate secrets otherwise unobtainable, according to the self-combustion principle by which success feeds itself. And yet, under such conditions the risk is to lose control over one's own actions. Perhaps this is what happened to Rebekah Brooks, Murdoch's red-maned proconsul in the UK; his seventh daughter, as the tycoon loved to say triggering jealousy among his family. To please her publisher-mentor, Brooks, as managing director, signed off on increasingly aggressive stories stuffed with confidential information and published under sensational headlines. The competition was in despair, until the unavoidable showdown.

It does not really matter whether the tycoon was aware of the methods used, whether he prompted or just approved them. The craving for indiscretion, the need to delve into private lives regardless of any principle of privacy, giving preference to the crowned heads who provide the highest reading statistics in the UK, arose from a competitive environment and a drug-like addiction to flattery. After all, it must be not easy to meet the expectations of 'the Shark', the nickname by which Murdoch is commonly known to emphasize his inclination to attack, tear apart and swallow his enemies, with no qualms whatsoever. It takes a strong stomach to digest the junk food involved in the task, and Brooks proved to possess an iron one. Where others did not dare to dwell, Brooks was at home. She imposed a distinctive professional style, skirting which brought exclusion from a winning team that 'taught' journalism to competitors, who bit the dust working for papers that seemed written for lilywhites and showed pathetic budgets in red. The formula worked, thrilled and induced admiration, and, more often than not, awe.

One does not get to be number one by chance; it takes guts, and to hell with good manners, ethic codes and professional rules. Besides, I stress, in this case readers got exactly what they wanted;

a keyhole through which to look at the world and its protagonists who, unprotected, show as much fragility, insecurity and sometimes ridicule as their ordinary secret watchers, who thus take revenge on the celebrities' luck.

Having inherited the *Melbourne Herald* and the *Adelaide News* from his father, the Australian-born Murdoch quickly increased his reach buying the *Sun* and the *News of the World* in the UK; the delight, that is, and then burden in his adventure. He also acquired the *New York Post* and the *New York Magazine* in the US. He imposed his methods and belief-system, sinking his teeth into every medium that belonged to him. He replaced executives, trampled established procedures and then proceeded to enrich his collection with the *Times* and the *Sunday Times*, flagships of the British press. He established *Sky Television*, which later merged with *British Satellite Broadcasting* into *BSkyB*. Then, the *20th Century Fox*, *Metromedia*, *Harper Collins Publishers* and the *Fox Television Network* joined his empire too. He bought *Star TV* in Asia and then the social media *My Space*, which became the most used web-site broadcasting music and songs. To top it up, he bought the *Dow Jones* and the *Wall Street Journal* from the Bancroft family, one of the most titled in the publishing world.

In Italy, Murdoch is active through *Sky Italy*, born from the merger of *Tele+* and *Stream* a venture that has made a marked difference in terms of information liveliness and timeliness. Under the direction of Emilio Carelli, attracted from Silvio Berlusconi's *Mediaset*, *SkyTg24* has won twice the accolade of best newscaster in the country. Through the broadcasting of football matches, the company has attracted huge subscription, substantially threatening the Berlusconi primacy.

The tycoon's private life also appears to be affected by his exuberance. Born in 1931, Murdoch graduated at Oxford, married three times and fathered four daughters and two sons, who have been involved in his activities with ups and downs and lack of continuity. At present, the star is his last wife, the Chinese Wend Deng who, much younger than him, has proved to be a true fighter in the face of investigators' questions.

Used to soaring to the stars and sinking to the gutter, to sell family assets to secure debts and to get the most beautiful and expensive houses when fortune smiled back, the Shark knows how to sail in all seas moving unscathed between Republican and Democrat support, while playing with relish and ruthlessness his king-maker role and taking advantage of the complexities of bi-polar political systems.

Presidents, chancellors, prime ministers and royalty have all bowed at least once to the wrinkled, fake friendly figure who controlled the most popular papers and the most watched TV networks. Throughout, Murdoch cleverly selected staff who were always up-dated, extremely well informed and privy to what goes on in the secret corridors of power, as if they were physically there. In a way, that is precisely where they were. Taking full advantage of state-of-the-art technological gadgets and with the complicity of key people in power, the electronic ears of the *News of the World* – and, many suspect, of other authoritative media – captured private conversations, secret communications, confidential briefs, angry outbursts, hopes, disappointments, joys and sorrows; it all was then used to satisfy an increasingly demanding audience.

Where should the limit be in all this? Who should sets such a limit, and according to what criteria? What should be punished, unlawful action or the intrusion into people's lives? How far can and must go the right, and the duty, to inform the public? Where, in the democratic system, lies the antidote to intrusiveness? Who is capable of using such means timely, before injustice is done, and without fear of retaliation?

This story, packed with incredible developments, is marked by society's slow, almost slothish reaction. Had it not been for the competitive scoop by the *Guardian's* journalist Nick Davies, author of past brilliant investigations full of scandalous implications, probably no one would have switched off the disreputable machine driven by the *News of the World*. Indeed, as complicities developed increasingly higher and wider, there was an ever diminishing hope that somebody would disclose the sources of so much vaunted (alleged) journalistic skills. The system's antibodies did not work or, perhaps, were neutralized by an illness that had become too pernicious to be defeated physiologically; that is, by actors' conscience, by the machine's drivers' rethinking or by action by the authorities. Instead, it was an equal and opposite thrust that did the job; a thrust authored by a professional rival most likely annoyed by the success of its competitor and unwilling to accept that that intrusive information resulted from appropriate investigations. All those thorny details, so voluptuously devoured by the public, could only come from espionage. So, the *Guardian* published the indictment on its front page, scoring a damaging hit to the great satisfaction of its editor Alan Rusbridger. It would be interesting to know what makes Rusbridger tick; would it be a commitment to justice and to protect the audience from this kind of

journalism, would it be sympathy with the victims or would it perhaps be revenge and the pleasure in hunting a powerful rival into the dust?

The *News of the World*'s talented, and for so long unbeatable, journalists were bested by someone who managed to uncover the technological tricks at the root of their professional success and who happily stripped naked the publishing world's king. The apparently granitic building from which Murdoch built his victories began to unravel at unexpected speed, indicating that the time was ripe for revenge.

Can we be happy with this epilogue? Can we always say that all is well that that ends well? Apart from the fact that this story's ending has not yet been written, the way in which it has unfolded so far leaves much to be desired; too many unanswered questions are left hanging. Missing, critical elements in this affair are a sense of proportion, before and after taking the lid off, and a definition of the dividing line between bad and good journalism. There has been a remarkable lack of measure in the *News of the World*'s staffs' ambition, in the conspiracy chain that helped and protected the paper, in the readers' greed, in the widespread deference to the holder of editorial power, in the complicit network of flatteries, in the advertisers' opportunism and in the hypocrisy of those who cried scandal for moralistic reasons. What happened was bound to happen. It was the unavoidable consequence of unscrupulous hands treating the journalistic product as a commodity. One cannot help wonder whether, given the chance, many harsh critics would have been more than willing to sit in the place of the winning Murdoch. Now, they rub their hands toasting the tyrant's fall. And yet, do they care about the presumably restored ethics and perhaps cleanliness of the profession?