

PIOTR PODEMSKI (WARSZAWA)

GLOBALISATION, POST-DEMOCRACY, MURDOCHISATION: THE IMPACT OF RUPERT MURDOCH ON CONTEMPORARY BRITISH MEDIA AND SOCIETY

The present study aims at an analysis of the role of Rupert Murdoch in the transformation of British media and society over the past few decades in reference to the notion of post-democracy, as outlined by a distinguished British sociologist – Colin Crouch. It traces the gradual expansion of the News Corporation-owned media in Britain in the context of the growth of a tabloid culture as well as Rupert Murdoch's political alliances with Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair resulting in acquiring a position of a media dictator. A variety of contemporary British opinions on the long-term social impact of these processes are presented.

KEY CONCEPTS

Rupert Murdoch, the Australian-born media mogul, whose News Corporation has grown to become the dominant global empire is currently with no doubt experiencing an exceptionally difficult stage in his overwhelming career, following the Royal family hacking scandal in the United Kingdom. Yet it was well before that some extremely radical accusations were made, putting the blame on Murdoch for “the nature of the perverse and shallow media coverage in this country” (D. Freedman 2008: 89) or even going far beyond the limits of pure journalism: “Murdoch was able to use his newspapers not simply to influence British politics in the way he chose, but also to change society. And not for the better. The *Sun*, in particular, had as clear an effect on British public discourse as it did on the noisy sexuality which was becoming more and more evident in British society. During the Thatcher years, the *Sun* turned coarse insults into the everyday language of political argument. [...] After a period of uncertainty about the course it should take, the *Daily Mirror* decided to follow the same route. The culture of soft porn, hard politics and celebrity gossip began to seep into the life of the country” (J. Simpson 2010: 488).

Although one might, as some commentators do, challenge the abovementioned views as extremely biased and typical of the left-wing intelligentsia opposing Murdoch for predominantly ideological reasons, it must be admitted that his

presence in the British public life since he purchased the “Sun” and the “News of the World”, has been widely felt and has significantly transformed both the country’s media and politics, as it seems, in a definitive way. It remains an open question whether Murdoch’s impact ought to be judged exclusively in terms of globalisation with his News Corporation of an Australian origin, its headquarters in the famous New York Rockefeller Building and a wide range of well-established broadcasters in Japan, China, India, Germany, Italy and Latin America as a focal point of any analysis stressing its characteristics as a contemporary equivalent of some former nation-state empires on which the sun never set.

It is often argued that global organisations of this kind not only successfully evade any state or democratic control, but in fact they make a serious contribution to the creation of a new social reality of our times: post-democracy, under which “while elections certainly exist and can change governments, [...] the mass of citizens plays a passive, quiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to the signals given them. Behind this spectacle of the electoral game, politics is really shaped in private by interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests”. (C. Crouch 2004: 4). In other words, there might be a strong link between the cultural and social along with purely political consequences of Rupert Murdoch’s activity. Scholars and media critics differ, though, as far as the real aims of contemporary world’s most prominent media magnate are concerned. While some claim his attitude is undoubtedly pragmatist, seeking solely the exploitation of markets for financial profit (D. Kishan Thussu 1998: 6), others point out to the Murdoch-owned Fox News firm conservative, pro-Republican stance in the United States (S. Vander Hooker 2011: 5) as well as to his legend as a “king maker”, with his growing ambition to determine the outcomes of elections, also in Britain (J. Simpson, 2010: 487).

It is beyond question that Rupert Murdoch must be viewed as an expression of a far more comprehensive process, by some authors termed “Murdochisation”, that could be characterised by a combination of the following factors: “a convergence of global media technologies; a tendency towards a market-driven journalism thriving on circulation and ratings wars; transnationalisation of US-inspired media formats, products and discourse; and lastly, an emphasis on infotainment, undermining the role of the media for public information” (D. Kishan Thussu 1998: 7) with all the complex and far-reaching cultural, social and political implications of this transformation. For these reasons I have found the subject in question worthy of a critical analysis and have proposed the present paper, which for the sake of space constraints will have to confine itself to the examination of the hereby outlined issues in reference to the social and political reality of Britain, leaving an analysis of the American case as well as the broader theoretical background for a major study I am going to dedicate to the subject’s intercultural dimension in the nearest future.

A NEW SUN RISES

In order to fully understand the great transformation provoked by the emergence of Rupert Murdoch as a leading factor, one must bear in mind the traditional, earlier model of British media: one of “public service”, operating for the public good, aiming at educating as well as “improving” the British society, yet at the same time running the risk of embracing a paternalistic and elitist approach (S. Tunney 2006: 15). All the more as it had been rather common for the national newspapers to be owned by some representatives of the ruling classes, including Lord Beaverbrook, Lord Rothermere and Lord Northcliffe (E. S. Herman, R. W. McChesney 1997: 166). These early British moguls regarded their newspapers as an instrument of propagating their political ideas, even if that was likely to diminish their selling revenues. The press played an important role in public life due to the typically protestant tradition of low illiteracy and high interest in public affairs, judging by southern European standards. An obstacle to its further development had long remained the extension of wartime rationing of newsprint that was finally lifted in 1956 (L. Gorman, D. McLean 2009: 193).

A very similar model was adopted by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in its initial steps through the 1930s. One of its founders, Sir John Reith, defined its role in terms of “broadcasting as a public service”, because of its “cultural and educative role” (L. Gorman, D. Mc Lean 2009: 142). The BBC was granted state monopoly and prohibited from advertising products and services since financing came from annual licenses for television and radio receivers. Thus, as it was argued, a key factor in the establishment of the BBC was the absence of an economic lobby, pressing for change (J. Curan 2002: 201). Even when ITV (Independent Television) was launched in 1955 as a “commercial” broadcaster, as opposed to the BBC, it was obliged to provide public service programmes, deemed indispensable within any television’s mission (E. S. Herman, R. W. McChesney 1997: 167). The very approach was reaffirmed following the Pilkington Committee report in 1962, which heavily came down on the ITV for the “populism” of its American programming, while praising the BBC and demanding the extension of its activity and good practice in recognition of the fact that television constituted “one of the major long-term factors that would shape the moral and mental attitudes, and the values of our society” (L. Gorman, D. Mc Lean 2009: 136).

It was in this social and cultural context that Rupert Murdoch purchased the “News of the World” in 1969, following a long struggle against another press magnate, Robert Maxwell. By that time, Murdoch had managed to build up his Australian press concern, inherited from his father in 1954, starting by acquiring more local newspapers in order to move on to magazines and founding his first TV channel in 1958, his motto being already then: “Expand or die!” (S. Vander Hooker 2011: 27, 49). Born in 1931, Rupert descended from a protestant Scottish family,

whose members had migrated to Australia in the late 19th century. However, their British roots remained solid, since his father gained experience in journalism with Lord Northcliffe in London, whereas young Rupert, by then a son of Australia's wealthiest media tycoon, was sent to study at Worcester College, Oxford.

Contrary to what one might expect of his family background, Murdoch is reported to have exposed evident leftist sympathies already as a student and upon starting his business in Britain he openly proclaimed himself to be somewhat of a populist: "the traditional media in this country is in tune with the elite, not the people... That is why we're not liked by the traditional media. That's not us" (S. Vander Hooker 2011: 58). No wonder the media establishment of the United Kingdom reacted with "widespread contempt" to his emergence, his critical attitude and, last but not least, to the brand new methods of journalism he brought (B. McNair 2009: 14). Undoubtedly, Rupert Murdoch was the most controversial of the British press barons who dominated the market after the 1960s.

Following its acquisition by Murdoch in 1969, the "Sun", once an ailing and troublesome socially radical Labour Party paper, was destined to become "the biggest-selling daily in the English-speaking world" by 1977. Faithful to the assumption that the proof for a paper's quality was its success measured by the sales, Murdoch decided to adopt the "more sex approach", the readers of the "News of the World" had already been familiar with. More bare breasts, crime tales and "sensations" were to appear to encourage increasing circulation (J. Knudson 2000: 105). The consequences were far-reaching: "The amount of news and information in the popular press has as a result declined, to be replaced by an endless spewing of sex, nudity, exposés of the private lives of people (and not only those in the public eye) and countless stories about the comings and goings of the Royal Family and the characters of soap operas" (L. Gorman, D. McLean 2009: 200-201).

To make the business cost-effective, both papers were to be printed using the same presses. An important question for the future remained Murdoch's political stance. At the 1970 election his headline was apparently predictable, yet remarkably moderate: "The Sun would vote Labour" (J. Simpson 2010: 470). Concerning his intentions on how far his political commitment would go, he is reported to have once said: "I did not come all this way not to interfere" (L. Gorman, D. Mc Lean 2009: 200; J. W. Knudson 2000: 105). Indeed, his real political activity was yet to come, but hardly anybody would have predicted his future ideological affiliations.

A DE FACTO ALLIANCE

Since 1949 the Royal Commissions on the press repeatedly expressed concerns about increasing concentration of press ownership and control. In 1965 it

was decided that large companies would need to be granted the consent of the Secretary for the Department of Trade and Industry to acquire more paper holdings. However, until 1977 not a single application of that kind was rejected. It was under these circumstances that in 1981 Rupert Murdoch was authorised to add “The Times” and the “Sunday Times” to his newspaper empire, increasing thus his share of national daily sales to 30 per cent, and that of Sunday sales to 36 per cent (I. Budge, D. McKay, J. Bartle, K. Newton 2007: 320). The two most prestigious papers were purchased from a Canadian press magnate, Lord Thomson, eager to rid himself of them as a result of financial difficulties provoked by continuous printers’ strikes (J. Simpson 2010: 487). It appears still controversial whether the Monopolies Commission failed to prevent this move because of the trade union activity or should this be interpreted as the first germ of an imminent alliance between News Corporation and the new Thatcherite government (B. McNair 2009: 49).

It is widely argued that Rupert Murdoch had been undergoing an ideological evolution towards the right prior to that episode, which could be supported by the conspicuous transformation of his stronghold “The Australian”, since its foundation in 1964 gradually steering towards “hardline free-market economics” (L. Artz, Y. R. Kamalipour 2007: 120). However, it might also be that it was the conservative authorities’ permission, aiming at the general media market deregulation that provided Murdoch with some good reasons to believe in Mrs. Thatcher’s sympathetic attitude and, simultaneously, put him in a position of certain confrontation with the trade unions power from an utterly capitalistic stance. Quite soon it occurred to be perfectly plausible to reconcile the “Sun”’s previous populist tune with the national pride of the Conservatives. The sinking of the Argentinian warship *Belgrano* was commented with the famous “Gotcha” headline, bearing resemblance to Victorian jingoism on the one hand, subject to harsh criticism from the left, on the other (J. Simpson 2010: 497).

What proved to be the highlight of the Thatcher-Murdoch alliance was the struggle against trade unions. Following his first defeat in 1983 and the subsequent government triumph in the miners’ strike (1984-1985), facilitated by News Corporation friendly media coverage, the new proprietor of the “The Times” resolved to address his own problem more effectively. Taking advantage of the general political climate, to everybody’s utmost surprise he moved the manufacturing process of his papers from the well-established Fleet Street centre to a newly inaugurated presses at Wapping in London’s East End, which he declared to be “a non-union workplace” (T. Marjoribanks 2000: 3). “Fleet Street, it has been argued – the historic centre, physically and figuratively, of the British newspaper industry – ceased to exist on January 26, 1986, the day on which Rupert Murdoch proved that it was possible to produce two mass circulation newspapers without a single member of his existing print force, without using the railways

and with roughly one-fifth of the numbers that he had been employing before” (N. Abercombe, A. Warde 2001: 205).

Obviously, the meaning of the episode went well beyond that. An estimated 5,500 of the Fleet Street staff were dismissed as Murdoch had brought new high technology equipment and specialists from the United States that were bound to change the British printing industry forever. The slogan of the day went: “Rupert Murdoch, hear us shout, you can’t keep the unions out!” (T. Marjoribanks 2000: 1). There was a great deal of picketing and violence at Wapping, to which the government responded resolutely with fines and threats of sequestration of trade union funds for compensation of the possible damage, which finally made the unions give up. Nevertheless, the clashes came to stand for one of the symbols of the Thatcher anti-union campaign, while the “Guardian” commented on 22nd January 1986 that the Wapping episode “has the potential to develop into a trauma for the Labour movement” (K. Laybourn, Ch. Collette 2003: 84).

Trade unions were finally broken. “A New Sun is Rising Today” was the headline of the first edition, manufactured at the Wapping works (J. Simpson 2010: 402). And perhaps it had not been until this moment that the Thatcher-Murdoch alliance was truly consolidated. One of the “The Times” editors even remarked that „Rupert and Mrs. Thatcher consult regularly on every important matter of policy. [...] Around here he’s often jokingly referred to as Mr. Prime Minister” (J. W. Knudson 2000: 105). Some of the left-wing circles were allegedly even contemplating an eventuality of founding an anti-Murdoch media concern, financed by the unions, which finally backed down because of the grave economic risk of the initiative (S. Tunney 2006: 62).

In 1988 Rupert Murdoch announced he would launch his satellite Sky TV from the Luxembourg-based Astra satellite, adding a significant comment: “Much of what passes for quality in British television is no more than just a reflection of the values of the narrow elite which controls it and has always thought that its tastes were synonymous with quality” (M. Starks 2007: 25). Apparently, in an attempt to expand his position from a press baron to a TV magnate, one he had already achieved in the USA having inaugurated his Fox Network in 1986, Murdoch was returning to his long forgotten populist, anti-elitist views, securing his place in history as a co-founder of what was named “tabloid television” (D. Kishan Thussu 1998: 185). Nonetheless, he was also getting in tune with the Thatcher media policies. As early as 1982 the new Channel 4 had been launched, meant to be commercial and provide for the needs of those spectators who were not satisfied neither with ITV nor the BBC. The latter also encountered some serious financial problems as the license fee funds did not suffice to cover the expenses of up-to-date TV shows, while it found little appreciation and support with Mrs. Thatcher who perceived the BBC as not just apolitical, but rather unpatriotic, if not amoral (L. Gorman, D. McLean 2009: 151). Such were at least

some of the conclusions of the Peacock Report (1986) that was preparing ground for a new Broadcasting Act, aiming at free-market-philosophy-oriented liberalisation of the media (D. Hesmondhalgh 2007: 123).

Needless to say, the prospect of yet another expansion of News Corporation's power and influence, after it had been allowed more than expected in reference to the press, was bound to provoke hostile reactions from a number of participants of the public debate. Rupert Murdoch recalled: "When we started Sky, everybody in Britain was against us. The whole of the media was against us. The British establishment was against us, and remains hysterically against us" (M. Starks 2007: 27). The resistance came from ideological adversaries as much as from business rivals as the foundation of Sky TV, and its immediate merger with the British Satellite Broadcasting in 1990 to form BSkyB, marked Murdoch's virtual monopoly over cable and satellite television in the UK. Yet again, the Monopolies Commission was prevented from taking any action, a decision often viewed as the last farewell gift of Mrs. Thatcher, just a few days before leaving Number 10 (J. Simpson 2010: 488). The cross-selling technique adopted, with Murdoch's newspapers promoting TV channels and vice versa, concurred to further reinforce the position of who was gradually growing to become a sort of "media dictator" (D. Hesmondhalgh 2007: 124, 167).

What needs to be emphasised is some critics' belief that although Margaret Thatcher personally "disapproved of much of the *Sun's* culture", stressing the very British notion of decency, in fact she "encouraged it [the tabloid culture] to happen" (J. Simpson 2010: 488). For the consequences of Rupert Murdoch's monopolistic position proved extensive. Exempted from the European Community requirement of broadcasting the minimum of 50 per cent European content, he packed the market with cheap American programming (talk shows, shopping, sitcoms, games) from his own studios, of dubious quality by previously recognised British standards. In order to attract advertisers, he made the most popular sports events his "battering ram", providing them with potentially huge audiences of financially independent young men (E. S. Herman, R. W. Mc Chesney 1997: 168, 75-76). The result was, as it is often stated, a "slow death of the public service approach" as competition for mass audiences under these circumstances was impossible (J. Curan, 2002: 201).

This was reinforced by the 1990 Broadcasting Act, passed by the Parliament amidst fierce protests from the Labour Party as well as some prominent Conservatives. In fact, it seemed somewhat less radical than initially expected as it did not totally suppress the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), but replaced it with the Independent Television Commission (ITC) with slightly restricted powers and responsibilities (D. Hesmondhalgh 2007: 123). Following Mrs. Thatcher's resignation in 1990 some Conservatives, including John Major, considered undertaking preparations for introduction of a "nationality clause", whose aim was to reduce the importance of foreign proprietors on the British

market, in full conformity with Stanley Baldwin's classic remark on inadmissibility of "power without responsibility" (S. Tunney 2006: 115). It was all too clear who was to fall victim to the planned regulation.

However, as News Corporation was growing excessively self-confident and independent, it seemed increasingly dangerous to be challenged. According to many observers, including those within Major's own party, the 1992 difficult electoral victory came to great extent thanks to Murdoch's support. Lord Mc Alpine, the Conservative Party's former treasurer, firmly stated: "The real heroes of the campaign were the editors of the Tory press [...]. This was how the election was won" (E. S. Herman, R. W. McChesney 1997: 169). Murdoch himself openly claimed the credit, as the "Sun"'s famous headline proclaimed: "It's The Sun Wot Won It" (I. Crewe, B. Gosschalk 1995: 130). Simultaneously, the BBC came under heavy criticism from the Conservative circles with the very same, traditional charges of exposing left-wing, liberal, anti-government attitudes. The conclusions were well predictable: with the new Broadcasting Act of 1996 further liberalisation and relaxation of controls on property concentration and cross-media ownership were brought in (D. Hesmondhalgh 2007: 123), an obvious Conservative contribution to strengthening the position of loyal News Corporation against the privileges of the hostile BBC.

Yet, under what many saw as a weak conservative leadership, the days of Mrs. Thatcher's personal friendship and equal partnership with the not yet all-powerful media mogul were extremely remote. The balance of power had gradually shifted. As tension was growing within the party in a new struggle for power, John Major, increasingly suspicious of the intentions of the traditional ally, is reported to have complained: „If I had a majority of a hundred and fifty, I would crush Rupert Murdoch" (S. Tunney 2006: 115). Obviously, these were no times for achieving that kind of secure majority and, consequently, the Conservatives never dared to run the risk. Instead, some six weeks prior to the 1997 general election, the surprised readers could see the "Sun"'s shocking headline: "We Back Blair" and Murdoch's de facto alliance with the Conservatives was falling to pieces (A. Geddes, J. Tonge 1997: 76).

THE NEW LABOUR

The circumstances of the beginning of Rupert Murdoch's political friendship with Tony Blair have remained some of a controversy. While some authors stress the "Sun"'s consistent and incessant harsh criticism towards the New Labour till the very moment of its pro-Blair declaration, most tend to believe the alliance had been pre-arranged long before that. The decisive argument, it is often argued, is provided by Tony Blair's famous visit to Hayman

Island, off the coast of Queensland and the speech he delivered at News Corporation world managers' conference (J. Simpson 2010: 522). In what can be viewed as Blair's "appeasement policy" attempt towards Murdoch (D. Coates, P. A. Lawler 2000: 229), the New Labour leader, determined to improve his relationship with the omnipotent media magnate, assured his interlocutors he would not pursue some of his colleagues' projects to "cap media ownership" (D. Freedman 2008: 113). It was not long after a Labour MP, Chris Mullin, had proposed a Media Diversity Bill aiming at preventing one media proprietor from owning more than one national newspaper and not more than 20% of any TV company. Significantly, in the 1997 New Labour Manifesto no mention of media ownership restrictions could be traced, which is often deemed indicative of how far New Labour moved away from its traditional roots (D. Coates, P. A. Lawler 2000: 228).

According to James Curan, it was back then that the "tabloid hounds pursuing Labour were recalled to heel in return for very strong signals that a New Labour government would not attack Murdoch's monopolist empire" (J. Curan 2000: 221). Other authors, disagreeing over the general friendly attitude of News Corporation towards Blair in the years 1995-1997, argue that Murdoch's decision in this respect came no earlier than 1997 and resulted largely from his firm conviction that Labour was going to triumph anyway and "a Labour victory in defiance of a *Sun* still rooting for the Conservatives was hardly likely to deter the subsequent Labour government from action, on cross-media ownership for example, designed to curb the power of the Murdoch empire [...]" (I. Crewe, B. Gosschalk, J. Bartle 1998: 118-119). The only remedy could have been to support the victor in an attempt to perform a classic *captatio benevolentiae*. As it is widely believed, Rupert Murdoch's specific instruction was for his papers to make their new pro-Blair stance as manifest as possible, against the objections of many senior journalists, worried about the probable lack of understanding for this surprising decision among the readers. In his own words, irrespective of the still enduring differences of some political beliefs, in 1997 "Tony Blair laid his cards on the table yesterday. [...] His vision of a New Britain is based on being honest and open. [...] An inspiring leader with a clear sense of direction" (I. Crewe, B. Gosschalk, J. Bartle 1998: 120).

It was no later than 1996 when the "Guardian" proclaimed Murdoch as Britain's "digital dictator", following the relaxation of media concentration measures by the Conservative government as well as an outstanding success of his subscription television, BSkyB, Europe's most profitable broadcaster (D. Kishan Thussu 1998: 78). His direct impact on the political consciousness of the British people had been steadily growing since 1989 marking the launching of Sky News, the country's first 24-hour TV news channel (B. McNair 2009: 14). As a result of the 1997 election, the Labour Party, only five years after its clamorous manifesto urging to reduce media concentration, now opted for "deregulation" of

the market, clearly favouring the existing, well-entrenched media empire against any new and unlikely competitors (D. Freedman 2008: 114).

Although one might claim that in fact not much has changed since the Murdoch-Thatcher alliance of the 1980s, the direct testimonies from the corridors of power tell us something quite opposite. Lance Price, a former media adviser to Tony Blair, recalled: "I have never met Mr. Murdoch, but at times when I worked at Downing Street he seemed like the 24th member of the cabinet. His voice was rarely heard [...], but his presence was always felt" (D. Freeman 2008: 12). The relationships of Rupert Murdoch with Mrs. Thatcher and Tony Blair seem, indeed, of a very different nature. If it was the Iron Lady's choice to back Murdoch in his struggle against whom she perceived as their common adversaries (trade unions and BBC), while there was little choice left for New Labour's leader, being this a widely shared view, possibly just an illusion, that he had been decisively assisted in his successful bid for power by the "Sun" and the "News of the World".

Moreover, there was no comparison between News Corporation real condition under Blair and under Thatcher as the empire had gradually expanded beyond anybody's control, with fewer and fewer defenders of what had been once recognised as the notion of public service. All this brings some most radical scholars to a typically post-democratic conclusion: it was now "Sun", "Times", "News of the World", "Sunday Times" and BSkyB to directly shape the policies of the state, far more than the state's representatives were prepared to shape the grand media proprietor's legal status and, consequently, his daily activity (D. Freeman 2008: 88). Due to his solid self-confidence and a well-established experience of lasting well beyond the terms in office of his short-lived political allies, Rupert Murdoch appears to be paying little attention to their day-to-day political well being. A typical example might be the 2005 episode when he revealed Tony Blair's private remark on the BBC coverage of Hurricane Katrina, "full of hatred for America". It is assumed Murdoch's aim was to take personal or business advantage of the fact to further undermine the position of the BBC, his direct rival both in Britain and the US, yet without any consideration of the political implications for Blair's domestic policy (J. Simpson 2010: 526).

However, the state's passive approach to the media problem provoked outbursts of heavy criticism, coming from the traditional strongholds of the Labour Party, including the left-oriented sections of the country's intellectual elite. The position of Tony Blair was by no means simple. Therefore, in 2000 the government White Paper entitled "A New Future for Communications" failed to address the problem effectively in this respect, since – according to the "Guardian" disappointment-driven editorial – "on the one hand it's paranoid about upsetting Murdoch and it doesn't want to offend the non-Murdoch community on the other" (D. Freedman 2008: 116). What resulted from the government

analysis was the 2003 Communication Act, involving “substantial liberalisation” and self-regulation “wherever possible”. The logic of free market was adopted throughout, the surprising element being it was coming from a Labour government. In the words of the system’s critics, constituting a neat majority of the scholars, under the supervision of the newly-created Office of Communications (Ofcom), whose responsibility was restricted to the media’s economic matters, not the broadcast content, British television was bound to end up as little more than “a distinctively English mix of gardening, cooking, quiz shows, home improvement, and low-end comedy[...], pop, chat, soap and sport” (L. Gorman, D. McLean 2009: 151-152), eager to attract huge audiences and generous advertisers at the same time.

It is hard to determine the future course of events. In November 2006 BSkyB purchased an 18% share of ITV, Britain’s largest commercial terrestrial broadcaster, resulting in a new wave of outrage and condemnation from Rupert Murdoch’s rivals and adversaries. Sir Richard Branson, the Virgin Group proprietor openly defined Murdoch as a “threat to democracy”, urging the government to “draw a line in the sand”, imposing restrictions on media ownership (D. Freedman 2008: 105). Symbolically, a meaningful assertion was an Ofcom 2007 report statement claiming that the principles of impartiality “actually impede the expansion of genuine diversity of views [...]. This may have fostered a middle-of-the-road culture in mainstream news. Views that do not fit easily within a conventional, two-sided debate can struggle to be heard, resulting in a discussion around a narrow perceived fulcrum” (B. McNair 2009: 37). This might have meant the traditional impartial public service model was totally wiped out by a Murdoch-propagated idea of a variety of opinionated sources, if it hadn’t been for the fact that at the same time, despite previous denouncements, Tony Blair decided to strengthen the BBC, maintaining the license fee for ten more years to come (2007-2017) in recognition of its worldwide prestige and a 44 per cent UK audience (L. Gorman, D. McLean 2009: 153).

MORE OF THE SAME?

One may easily come up with a common sort of counter-argumentation, claiming that most authors to whom the above references have been made are largely preoccupied, in tune with Colin Crouch’s theory of post-democracy, with the impact of Rupert Murdoch on “equalitarian rather than liberal democracy” (C. Crouch 2004: X). Thus, from the free market perspective, as we have seen, gradually embraced in Great Britain, News Corporation must be regarded as an extremely successful undertaking. Indeed, most observers admit “Murdoch has an indisputable reputation for making money, but what he does not have is a re-

putation for being the vanguard for quality journalism” (S. Vander Hooker 2011: 49). In spite of the fact the true condition of his empire is rather difficult to fully examine on account of its complex transcontinental structure, the recent reports have indicated News Corporation earnings in 2009 exceeded 30 million dollars, whereas Murdoch’s personal wealth was estimated at 6.3 billion dollars, ranking number 117 on “Forbes” list of world’s richest people and, significantly, making him the richest media giant (S. Vander Hooker 2011: 11). Hence, by most media managers he is seen with “respect and fear” as one who “basically wants to conquer the world. And he seems to be doing it” (E. S. Herman, R. W. McChesney 1997: 70-71). What is even more, at times it is made clear that going out of the “camped, filthy and dangerous” Fleet Street presses and introducing new printing technologies against the desperate resistance of trade unions, Murdoch may have “wrenched the entire British newspaper industry out of the dark ages” (M. Tungate 2004: 55, 59) as before 2003 all the remaining news organisations moved elsewhere, following his footsteps as they did in many other aspects of the media business. Some arrive up to the point of a hypothesis that the British media market may have survived the last decades thanks to Murdoch alone (J. Simpson 2010: 543).

To some extent the critical tone of most studies could be explained in terms of an intellectual fashion, competition and rivalry from other media as well as simple human envy. His collaborators will, as they have done in the past, probably tend to downplay his real daily impact on the line of his papers articles: “Murdoch sits in New York at the head of a vast corporation, and he certainly does not have the time to pick up the phone to our editor every five minutes” (M. Tungate 2004: 64). It is also likely to be evoked that, in fact, “concentrated ownership and control of the British newspaper business is by no means new. In 1910 the biggest press magnate of the day, Lord Northcliffe, controlled 39 per cent of national daily circulation. In 2003 his modern equivalent, Rupert Murdoch, has 35 per cent of the daily and almost 40 per cent of the Sunday market” (I. Budge, D. McKay, J. Bartle, K. Newton 2007: 319). In a rather similar spirit News Corporation proprietor has often dismissed much of the typical charges brought against him: “The media sector is experiencing an historic growth spurt. Pluralism and diversity are growing organically under our very noses while we agonize about their shrinkage” (D. Freedman 2008: 77).

However, these charges actually miss the point, since clearly the entire discourse is not about Rupert Murdoch as an individual, being concerned with the ongoing global social processes one should mean to be aware of rather than judge them. And News Corporation, as it is widely agreed, “provides the archetype for the twenty-first century global media firm in many respects and is the best case study for understanding global media firm behavior” (E. S. Herman, R. W. McChesney 1997: 70). If there have always been powerful media tycoons, they

were usually primarily concerned with newspapers alone, without becoming heads of truly global multimedia corporations, outreaching beyond any form of state control (L. Gorman, D. Mc Lean 2009: 200). Or, alternatively, if one is ready to admit that argument, it brings us back to Colin Crouch's interpretation of contemporary democracy tending to move over a kind of a parabola closer to the late 19th century patterns, with the rule of restricted elites over passive majorities.

Another point of discussion could be the very idea of British media diversity. If deceptively the market seems extremely competitive with about twenty national daily and Sunday newspapers, in fact as much as 80 per cent of the paper circulation, as of 2000, was controlled by five media groups (L. Gorman, D. Mc Lean 2009: 193), which brings it close to an idea of the media market development resulting in reproducing "more of the same" formats, styles and views. As the possibilities of a market entry remain economically restricted, it is improbable to reckon new, independent titles are likely to appear, while the existing ones tend to remain more right-wing than their public, owing to their ownership structure (J. Curan, 2002: 231).

In my own view, the problem may be yet more complex. It could seem an oversimplification to regard Rupert Murdoch as a right-wing ideologist, he has been far more of that in the United States than in Britain. The truly dangerous dimension of his empire is his flexibility and the ability to adapt to the local conditions in order to strengthen his purely business standings. His worldwide inclination to back conservative, right-wing forces rather than their adversaries does not necessarily have to be, as it is usually interpreted, a mixture of his genuine ideology and sheer pragmatism (J. Curan 2002: 230). It might result directly from right-wing formations *per se* greater openness to the idea of deregulation, neoliberalism and free market with no public-service oriented restrictions. The fact is, as we have seen when analysing the British case, this leads up to a democracy paralysis, since politicians of any affiliation whatsoever, eager to avoid an electoral failure, have made attempts to secure Murdoch's increasingly powerful support, shaping their media policy according to his will, thus making the state institutions more and more fragile and finally helpless against his global empire, anyway difficult to control (S. Vander Hooker 2011: 22). This happens as political leaders and decision-makers come to share the belief it is virtually impossible to win any election without media support or, better, against their stance.

But what has been, realistically, the direct impact of Rupert Murdoch's strategic choices and political alliances on the British general public in terms of sheer numbers over the last two decades? It is most interesting to examine closely Ipsos MORI data on fluctuations of voting with reference to newspaper readership in 1992-2010 elections:

	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010
The Sun					
CONSERVATIVE	45%	30%	29%	33%	43%
LABOUR	36%	52%	52%	45%	28%
The Times					
CONSERVATIVE	64%	42%	40%	38%	49%
LABOUR	15%	28%	28%	27%	22%
All British Adults					
CONSERVATIVE	43%	31%	33%	33%	37%
LABOUR	35%	44%	42%	36%	30%

Source: Voting by Newspaper Readership 1992-2010, published 24 May 2010 – www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive

It is conspicuous that while the current political declarations of Rupert Murdoch cannot prevent most of “The Times” readers from supporting the Conservative Party, there is a strong correlation between the “Sun”’s official stance and its readership’s decisions: switching from Conservatives to Labour and vice versa. Interestingly, the data available for all the other papers follow “The Times” pattern, with the readers consistent voting in favour of the same party throughout the period in question. In conclusion, although Rupert Murdoch’s possibilities of exerting political influence on the wealthy and well-educated are limited, he seems the only man perfectly capable of shaping to political opinions of his “tabloid culture” consumers. One needs to bear in mind the characteristics of the British FPTP (First-Past-the-Post) electoral system, resulting in even minor shifts in public opinion polls likely to have a decisive impact on the composition of government (take account of the 2005-2010 unusually modest electorate flows bringing about a political change). That is also why scholars tend to be rather skeptical about the eventuality of the ailing state being substituted in its regulatory role by a – to say it with Jurgen Habermas – “global public sphere” (D. Kishan Thussu 1998: 96) subject to manipulation, at least as far as the tabloid readers sector is concerned.

As I am writing these words Great Britain is going through one of the major institutional crises in its contemporary history. Following a hacking scandal in the “News of the World”, there have been arrests among News Corporation staff with some exceptionally close links to the current Prime Minister, David Cameron. The largest British tabloid’s edition of 10th July 2011 is announced to be the last one, an end to the paper’s history dating back to 1843. There are a variety of comments on the issue, perhaps with not enough distance and insight to be quoted, yet all this is but another proof of how Rupert Murdoch has shaped and continues to shape Britain’s media and public life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- ABERCROMBIE N. / WARDE A. (2001): *The Contemporary British Society Reader*, Cambridge.
- ARTZ L. / KAMALIPOUR Y. R. (2007): *The media globe: trends in international mass media*, Plymouth.
- BUDGE I. / MCKAY D. / BARTLE J. / NEWTON K. (2007): *The new British politics*, Harlow.
- COATES D. / LAWLER P. A. (2000): *New Labour in Power*, Manchester.
- CREWE I. / GOSSCHALK B. (1995), *Political communications: the general election campaign of 1992*, Cambridge.
- CREWE I. / GOSSCHALK B. / BARTLE J. (1998): *Political communications: why Labour won the general election of 1997*, London.
- CROUCH C. (2004): *Post-Democracy*, Cambridge.
- CURAN J. (2002): *Media and Power*, London.
- FREEDMAN D. (2008): *The politics of media policy*, Cambridge.
- GEDDES A. / TONGE J. (1997): *Labour's landslide: the British general election*, Manchester.
- GORMAN L. / MCLEAN D. (2009): *Media and Society into the 21st Century. A Historical Introduction*, Oxford.
- HERMAN E. S. / MCCHESENEY R. W. (1997): *The Global Media. The New Missionaries of Global Capitalism*, London.
- HESMONDHALGH D. (2007): *The cultural industries*, London.
- KISHAN THUSSU D. (1998): *Electronic Empires. Global Media and Local Resistance*, London.
- KNUDSON J. W. (2000), *In the news: American journalists view their craft*, Wilmington.
- LAYBOURN K. / COLLETTE CH. (2003): *Modern Britain since 1979: a reader*, London.
- MARJORIBANKS T. (2000): *News corporation, technology and the workplace: global strategies, local change*, Cambridge.
- MCNAIR B. (2009): *News and journalism in the UK*, London.
- SIMPSON J. (2010): *Unreliable sources: how the 20th century was reported*, London.
- STARKS M. (2007): *Switching to digital television: UK public policy and the market*, Bristol.
- TUNGATE M. (2004): *Media monoliths: how great media brands thrive and survive*, London.
- TUNNEY S. (2006): *Labour and the press: from New Left to New Labour*, Brighton.
- VANDER HOOKER S. (2011): *Rupert Murdoch: News Corporation Magnate*, North Mankato.