

How an unpretentious charmer became fixated on a conspiracy of liberals

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FOR someone who has a genuine love of newspapers and a deep interest in television, Rupert Murdoch has very odd views on journalism and the media. He is contemptuous of most journalistic ideals, reserving special disdain for what he calls the "liberal media". While the rest of the world hailed the investigative journalism of the Watergate scandal in the 1970s, Murdoch scorned it as "the new cult of adversarial journalism".

In 1984, he complained about the critical media coverage of Ronald Reagan's policies. The press was trying to change the country's political agenda and its traditional values, he claimed. In the years since, Murdoch's attacks on the mainstream media have been regular.

Yet Rupert Murdoch is at least as devoted to propagating his *own* ideas and political beliefs as he is to making money. Murdoch has a particular conservative world view that has evolved over the years and on whose evangelisation he spends many millions annually, through both corporate spending and personal (often secret) donations. Key parts of his empire are deeply enmeshed in their nation's politics and operate as megaphones for Murdoch's values and leverage.

More than any other global corporate giant, Murdoch has supported and participated in conservative think tanks in the United States, Britain and Australia. In 1988-89 he took a seat on the board of the Hoover Institution, during the high tide of Reaganism, joining former Reagan official Jeane Kirkpatrick and former Defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld. At the same time, in Australia Murdoch joined the council of the Institute of Public Affairs and remained on it until 2000, regularly giving generous donations to the influential think tank (while his journalists continued to report regularly on the institute and its political campaigns).

In 1997, he joined the board of the Cato Institute, a Washington-based libertarian think tank set up by the owner of one of the largest private companies in the US oil industry. At that time, the institute was running an active campaign of climate change denial, as were oil companies such as ExxonMobil. In Britain, News Corporation was deeply involved in the country's oldest free market think tank, the Institute of Economic Affairs, which played a vital role in laying the intellectual foundations on which Thatcherism was built, especially its policies on free markets, deregulation and privatisation.

Murdoch's *The Australian* newspaper regularly publishes articles and columns by writers drawn from the ranks of such conservative think tanks in Australia and overseas.

In fact, Murdoch has used his media assets countless times to advance his political beliefs and play favourites with governments and political parties. Both Fox News and the London *Sun* make vast amounts of money, and both operate as powerful political levers to support or oppose political parties and their leaders.

Murdoch's Fox News is credited not only with influencing its loyal audience but with affecting the tone of all US television, an influence summed up by the term "the Fox News effect". Its shouting heads broadcast a nightly mantra of fear-filled messages to their 3 million viewers. Its swirling graphics and dramatic music intensify its "Fox News Alerts" about the latest threat from terrorists, liberals, gays - and Democrats.

President Barack Obama has been a particular target. When he was running for the Democratic nomination in 2007, Fox News commentators rushed to air a false report that as a child growing up in Indonesia, Obama had been educated at an Islamic school. Later, during the presidential campaign, one Fox commentator flippantly suggested Barack and wife Michelle had greeted each other with a "terrorist fist jab". The commentator later apologised, as did another Fox commentator who had joked about assassinating Obama and Osama bin Laden after supposedly muddling their names.

Throughout the campaign, one of Fox News' belligerent hosts, Sean Hannity, nightly attacked Obama for being an "arrogant elitist" and suggested that he had been a friend of terrorists and black radicals, echoing pro-Republican attack advertisements.

Murdoch had another, less direct, connection to the Republican campaign for the presidency that year. One of his editors "discovered" Sarah Palin, promoted her as a rising Republican star and then supported her when she became the vice-presidential candidate beside John McCain.

As it turned out, Fox News' support for the McCain-Palin ticket and its relentless hostility to Obama were not enough to hold back the tidal wave of support for the Democrat candidate. But this was just the beginning.

Within a few months of Obama's in-auguration a new political phenomenon was born, the "Tea Party", which attacked the spending and tax increases needed to deal with the global crisis. For the first time in years, conservative political action took the form of angry street protests. Fox News talk show hosts urged their audiences to support the rallies, its website gave details of the locations and times. In the weeks before the first major Tea Party rallies in April 2009, Fox News promoted them aggressively, urging viewers to "vent your anger".

Fox News then consciously manipulated the language of political debate once Obama was in power. When his health package was being discussed, a senior Fox executive sent a "friendly reminder" to staff urging them to use the term "government-run health insurance" and to avoid the term "the public option". If the latter phrase had to be used, it was better to refer to it as "the so-called public option". In similar fashion, the *New York Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* routinely referred to "government-run healthcare" and "the so-called public option". This coincided precisely with advice given by Republican strategists to their party.

BUT Murdoch's ideological beliefs are not a neat package. To begin to understand them, it is easier to see what he is against. The need to battle against the liberal media is not merely Murdoch's opinion; it is fundamental to his media strategy. It is both a passionate cause and a business model. In the early days of Fox News, it operated as a form of product differentiation in a crowded market for news and television. In Australia and Britain, Murdoch's war on the liberal media takes the form of attacks on the public broadcasters, the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Columnists on *The Sun* and *The Times* attack the BBC for left-wing bias and elitism. This was particularly evident during the Iraq invasion but has been a consistent theme from the early 1980s. Similarly, *The Australian* rails against the news programs of the ABC, which it says are "guilty of a consistent left-liberal

slant". Murdoch's main newspaper rival in Australia is Fairfax Media, which owns *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*. These too are subject to attacks for liberal bias.

What is unique about the political view that distinguishes Murdoch and News Corporation is the idea that left-wing opinions and liberalism are promoted by a powerful "liberal elite".

Born of his early years in Australia, Murdoch's distaste for elites and establishments is quite sincere. He has refused knighthoods offered by the British government and, for a long while, travelled in commercial airliners rather than his own corporate jet.

His lack of pretence and his attacks on snobs gave him a refreshingly honest personal charm for many years, but they were transmuted into the bizarre view that conservatives are oppressed by liberal elites who have captured government, the mass media, science and the universities, and whose ideas on culture and politics dominate by virtue of the orthodoxy of "political correctness".

Murdoch's fight against elitist political correctness led to two of the most outlandish ideas ever promoted by News Corporation. The first is that climate science and the consequent threat of global warming are nothing more than "orthodoxies" propagated by an elite of politically motivated scientists. (Orthodoxies are beliefs that are accepted because they are supported by the powerful voices of authority, not by any intrinsic merit.) According to this view, climate change deniers, regardless of their lack of evidence and (in most cases) scientific qualifications, are brave dissidents against an orthodox doctrine. Murdoch's media have provided a platform for this since the 1990s, except for a short interlude.

The second idea surfaced when health authorities were battling the stigma and prejudice attached to people suffering from the disease AIDS. Parts of the Murdoch media, led by *The Sunday Times*, began a campaign against the "medical establishment", which had proposed that the HIV virus causes AIDS. This perfectly accurate deduction was treated as the "orthodoxy" of an oppressive, politically correct elite. One or two contrarian medical researchers were lionised as heroic dissidents, and *The Sunday Times* undermined all public health warnings about the condition. When reputable scientists strongly criticised *The Sunday Times* for its AIDS denialism, the newspaper loudly accused them of censorship.

All of this suggests a pattern: when the Murdoch media oppose certain ideas, they describe them as "orthodoxies". Yet to regard well-founded scientific research as an orthodoxy demonstrates the kind of postmodern relativism that Murdoch newspapers also attack. (Extreme relativists believe that history depends on the teller, and they deny the possibility of objective facts.) In this rhetorical populist battle against political correctness, black becomes white, and Murdoch and his editors, far from being smug journalists with conventional ideas, become rebels and outsiders who defy establishments and elites. Glamour appears where none exists. Attacks on the elite by Murdoch's editors and commentators become the legitimate protests of an oppressed group struggling against unjust domination. Naturally, such an image is convenient to very wealthy and powerful men like Murdoch, who has an extremely good claim to being part of a genuine social elite.

Murdoch's populist crusade against the liberal elite conceals an orthodoxy in which he himself passionately believes. His preferred form of political correctness prescribes small government, low tax, free trade, privatisation and the extensive use of market mechanisms in all parts of society.

Always the crusader, Murdoch has been involved with free market experiments far beyond the economy. One of these is the attempt to transform public education so that schools form a competitive marketplace. Murdoch has become personally involved in this, giving \$US500,000 to one initiative and \$US5 million to another.

His preferred model is the New York school system under its controversial former chancellor Joel Klein. As with Murdoch's other crusades, there is a business angle. In November 2010, Murdoch appointed Klein to the board of News Corporation and also made him a senior executive with a brief to advise Murdoch on how the company could profit from education. As part of this move, Murdoch bought an educational software company, Wireless Generation. The software and other tools developed by his new company were used to implement a national regime of standardised testing of students. The test scores, along with parent choice, helped to create a competitive marketplace.

Like many ideologically based theories, Murdoch's version of school reform can seem seductive until it is actually applied. In New York, after the Klein regime of standardised testing, sacking teachers and closing schools had been applied for several years, the test scores of students showed little or no improvement. On top of this, some of the original conservative supporters of this free market theory became its most powerful critics, including Professor Diane Ravitch, a Republican-appointed assistant secretary of education.

Since the turn of this century, many of Murdoch's political and economic beliefs have come increasingly under siege. His support for the invasion of Iraq proved to be founded on falsehoods about weapons of mass destruction; his erratic stance on climate change looked ill-judged, and the scepticism to which he finally reverted is simply wrong; and his confident belief in free market orthodoxy was shaken by the 2008 global crisis in the deregulated financial system.

But in order to exert influence a powerful man like Rupert Murdoch does not need always to be right; he simply needs the ability to exercise advocacy, and he can do this through his ownership of a global news empire.

This is an edited extract from David McKnight's book *Rupert Murdoch: An investigation of Political Power*, published by Allen & Unwin and available next week.