

[*The Man Who Owns the News: Inside the Secret World of Rupert Murdoch, Michael Wolff, Broadway, 464 pages*]

Murdoch Exposed

By Philip Weiss

RUPERT MURDOCH is a global action figure. The Australian talked foreign policy in the White House with John Kennedy when he was 30 years old. A decade later, he began making his way in New York media by buying the *New York Post* and championing future mayor Ed Koch. He has owned newspapers on four continents and pushed several wars in the Middle East, including the Iraq disaster. His role in the legendary dismissal of Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in 1976, when the left-winger opposed U.S. policy, has always been a mystery, right up there with Mossadegh and Pinochet.

Journalist Michael Wolff got hours of Murdoch's time to produce a portrait in *dishabille*. It turns out that, like other action figures, Murdoch doesn't have a lot to say. He's not reflective, he's inarticulate, and he has rarely read a book. He's unsocialized, underwhelming, and superstitious, the author reports. There's not much inner life and no psychology. He's "spectral." A finger-drummer.

He is amazingly hard working, however, from the moment he has his porridge—a "horse has to have its chaff," Murdoch says with charm. But that charm is limited. Murdoch is a net-worker, not a socializer, Wolff observes astutely. "Murdoch can seem rather out of it," he says. "That's partly the hearing issue, which no one acknowledges."

Wolff has made up for his subject's personality deficit with a dizzying feat of intimate storytelling. He narrates Murdoch's purchase of the *Wall Street Journal* from its old, resistant family owners in 2007 as a white-knuckler, throwing in a lot of entertaining side stories about Murdoch's

social progress. We read a great deal about Murdoch's three wives and six children and his several hair colors, too—gray, orange, aubergine. Brearley, the Manhattan private school he intrigued to get his daughter into, is in the index, while Iraq, the country he intrigued to get his adopted land to invade, doesn't show up. Murdoch's undershirt, or "singlet," is an essential device for Wolff. The comic climax of the tale is the consummation of Murdoch's relationship with wife number three, Wendi Deng, who is nearly 40 years his junior: "Let us pause for a moment to consider the first moment when Wendi sees the singlet come off."

The hard writerly chore of trying to imagine a soul where none may exist has pluses and minuses. On the plus side, Wolff is a shrewd and dazzling writer who has engaged in media ownership himself. He projects his own ego and values on to his inarticulate hero, and his book contains many excellent insights into how business works, how newspapers work, and how the New York elite works.

Take, for example, how Murdoch, seeking to leverage a daughter from Nightingale-Bamford school to Brearley, recruits lawyer/Clintonite/publicist Gary Ginsberg to help him get a letter from Caroline Kennedy, a Brearley

to play Murdoch: the likes of John Podhoretz, "a strange, abrasive, Asperger's type" and the late Eric Breindel, who died in 1998, Wolff says, of AIDS.

Wolff's observations on newspaper culture are also prizes. He loves Murdoch because he is a great troublemaker of the English tabloid tradition. Murdoch is "not a modern journalist but the last representative from an era when a newspaper was its own advertisement, when it had to sell itself." But the American newspaper serves a different function. It was an aspirational tool for its middle-class readers: "A newspaper's best strategy was to be sedate, mannerly, uncontroversial—to offend no one, and not to call attention to the fact that it has monopolized the market..."

The culture got worse when, in the aftermath of Watergate, the news business began to explode and journalism, in Wolff's delectable phrase, became a "profession of choice ... the newsgathering function was overtaken by the information-processing one—more specialized skill sets were required..." News was now serious, joyless, robbed of personality.

In the novel that Wolff makes of Murdoch's life, the hero is no worse than the rest. The real reason he wants to buy the *Wall Street Journal* is not to suck the

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alumna and board member, on the girl's behalf. And we learn that when the legendary publicist Howard Rubenstein wants to show his power in the newsroom, he takes a long walk with "client in tow" right through it, toward the owner's office.

Murdoch now has designs, Wolff asserts, on the *New York Times*, whose publisher Arthur Sulzberger "wants to be some New Age media mogul; Rupert wants to be a newspaper proprietor." Not that Murdoch is always sharp. His *New York Post* loses nearly \$50 million a year and employs ideologues who know how

music out of it, as he seems to have done with the *Times* of London, but to please his "liberal-ish" wife, Wendi, who revels in media celebrity and packs her unglamorous husband into Prada suits. The *Journal* is meant to be a cultural counterweight to the property that makes Murdoch a lot of money but he can't abide: Fox News, led by his "monster," Roger Ailes, and someone else Murdoch "despises," the "bullying, mean-spirited" Bill O'Reilly.

And so, after 400 pages, Murdoch, whom Wolff unconvincingly styles as an outsider in an effort to jazz the reader's

interest, has become the Obama-loving blue-state insider.

Can the reader hang in that long, even with the pleasure of Wolff's headlong comical prose? Put another way, as Wolff asked in his most famous moment in journalism when, at the start of the Iraq War, he boldly took on a general at the sterile media center in Qatar: "What's the value proposition? What's the value of what we're learning at this million-dollar press center?" I'd say that this story is not a value proposition for two reasons, political and social.

Wolff reminds his readers that the business story is the great drama of recent journalism. The journalism of the journalism business is business. But timing has been unkind to Wolff. His book comes out as readers are beginning to wonder how many of the heroic tales of capitalism we have been fed over the last 20 years have been, well, underwritten by suck-ups to the heroes themselves. Quite a bit, to judge from Wolff's own reports.

Had the author anticipated this shift in the zeitgeist and expressed some dyspep-

sia about globalism and growth for growth's sake and the puffery that surrounds it, he might have escaped some of the damage of the financial meltdown. But Wolff loves deals and deal-makers. It's worth repeating that he says nothing about the disaster that Murdoch helped underwrite, the Iraq War. He takes numerous jabs, meanwhile, at anybody who vaguely questions political authority. The Whitlam affair is brushed off. One of Murdoch's sons is dispatched as a "tree-hugger." An owner of the *Wall Street Journal* lives in Burlington Vermont, an "alternative-lifestyle capital," Wolff says with New York provincialism, where she runs (start the irony drip) a "sustainable and socially conscious redevelopment company." The *Village Voice* is a "leftwing insane asylum." (What, then, is the *New York Post*, haven to vicious drunken jingoists and losing a million a week?) Wolff repeatedly derides the *WSJ*'s old family as "proudly remote from commerce"—left-leaning, entitled, elitist.

It's one thing to have values, it's another to be so assumptive about them. It does not help that Wolff's acknowledgments, which precede his story, end with a fulsome paean to Claridge's, Wolff's favorite hotel in London, which I would quote but for the fact that I'd have to read it a second time.

The same provincialism inhabits Wolff's social values. The New York world that Rupert Murdoch makes his progress in is a Jewish one. At times almost all his acolytes and henchmen and lawyers and bankers seem to be Jewish. Many of these close associates, Irwin Stelzer, Breindel, Howard Rubenstein, are Zionists and neoconservatives. I don't remember either word appearing in this book—though "neoconish" does.

Wolff is of that world, and that's fine. He savors acumen, the love of the deal, globalism, prestige, image-making. The shadow hero of the book would seem to be its main unspoken source, Matthew Freud, great-grandson of you-know-who, a publicist married to a Murdoch daughter and a media/publicity necromancer in the mold of Wolff himself.

"Freud too has been a factor in this book," Wolff says opaquely, about the time he and the reader are tiring of its subject.

The problem for a reader who wants to understand the ways of the new establishment is that Wolff cannot step outside that culture for even a minute to explain it. Meanwhile, he takes endless shots at WASPs. He must use that word a dozen times, and it is always a put-down for crusty entitlement, if not clubby anti-Semitism. Wolff angrily rebukes an allegedly anti-Semitic writer who frowned on Stelzer for not storing wine properly. He fails to point out, meanwhile, that Stelzer is another neocon working at the Hudson Institute, a co-author of the Iraq War.

I wish Wolff could have been even a fraction as wiseass about Jews as he is about Protestants. WASP culture, he says smartly, "capitulated. Just sat down and refused to go on." It was "patrician, remote and snobbish." OK. And what about the culture that replaced it? How essential is a love of Israel to Murdoch's new set? What does it signify that, of Murdoch's brood, Wolff has the greatest disdain for son James, the treehugger, who goes off on Zionists in an audience with his father and Tony Blair (a story culled from someone else's book)? When father Murdoch attacks the Palestinians, James says he's "Talking f-----g nonsense. ... They were kicked out of their f-----g homes and had nowhere to f-----g live." Wolff characterizes James as "aggressive," "intense," "judgmental."

It is Wolff's fine achievement that we see how Rupert Murdoch's politics are not well thought through. They are ready-made, instinctual and handy, pragmatic. If you are a suck-up with a simple argument, Wolff notes with savage insight, you can get far with the publisher. Murdoch goes with the spirit of the times—and may adjust better to the new one than his biographer. ■

Philip Weiss is at work on a book about the American army in Australia in 1943. He blogs at www.philipweiss.org/mondoweiss/.

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[*Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution—and How It Can Renew America*, Thomas L. Friedman, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 448 pages]

Globalist Meltdown

By Pat Choate

RACHEL CARSON received a letter in 1958 from a friend in Massachusetts describing the destruction of birdlife on Cape Cod caused by DDT spraying. Carson, a marine biologist and nature author, unsuccessfully tried to interest several magazines in an article about the dangers posed by the world's most powerful pesticide. Undeterred, she spent the next four years writing *Silent Spring*, which *The New Yorker* serialized in June 1962. It instantly became a worldwide bestseller.

The use of DDT was eventually banned in the United States and many other nations. As the Natural Resources Defense Council now notes, however, the book's strongest legacy was not that ban but the cultivation of "a public awareness that nature was vulnerable to human intervention." The dangers Carson outlined—contamination of the food chain, cancer, genetic damage, the loss of entire species—were so frightening that they made acceptable the notion of regulating industry. Environmentalism was born.

Fifty years later, Thomas Friedman in *Hot, Flat, and Crowded* sounds a similar alarm about the dangerous convergence of global warming, rising population growth, and economic globalization. The resulting brew, he argues, threatens world stability and even life itself. His solution is a massive global shift from dirty carbon fuels to clean energy and conservation. The shift would require innovation on a historic scale. Friedman envisions that the task can provide the basis for the renewal of the American spirit and economy, if U.S. leaders accept the challenge.

Friedman's description of "crowding" is nothing less than a neo-Malthusian portrayal of a rapidly growing world population that is overstressing its resources. Between 2008 and 2050, the United Nations projects, the world's population will grow from 6.7 billion people to more than 9.2 billion. Put into context, this is roughly equal to adding two Chinas to the world's population over the next four decades.

As the people of these countries struggle to find shelter and food, they are destroying forests and wetlands, converting arable land into urban slums, overfishing their streams, lakes, and oceans, even as they drain their available water supplies. Entire species of flora and fauna are disappearing as parts of the earth die.

Friedman notes that China, India, and a handful of other nations are creating a middle class that aspires to follow the lifestyles of Americans, Europeans, and the Japanese. Satisfying the needs of unfettered economic globalization creates demands for resources of all kinds, and the related production relies on dirty fuels—oil, coal, and natural gas. The current world economic crisis may reduce those demands in the short term, yet in the longer term they are sure to expand.

A world of growing need for goods and food, coupled with the corresponding rise in production that relies on carbon fuels, is releasing rising amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, where it remains for thousands of years. This Friedman calls hot. In turn, these gases are changing the heat balance between earth and the sun and are putting at risk the habitat of every creation on earth.

The problem, according to Friedman, is that the existing global dependence on coal, oil, and natural gas cannot be sustained. While large reserves of each exist, to continue our trust in them would be a form of long-term collective suicide. A clean, green alternative is required.

Despite the growing obviousness of the need for what Friedman terms "Code Green," dreadful obstacles exist. The global "petrodicatorship" is one.

Carbon-producing nations are the beneficiaries of a massive transfer of wealth that exceeds trillions of dollars annually. Those nations need only tap what is beneath their land to collect the riches of the world. This largest of all cartels has every incentive to cut production and raise prices while alternative energy sources are undeveloped and to raise production and lower prices whenever they need to stifle any innovation.

Another barrier is the existing investment in a carbon-based energy system. Imagine that some genius was to have a eureka moment and invent an abundant, cheap, clean, reliable, and safe energy source. The principal opponents to implementing this technology would be the existing energy providers—much as Edison tried to block Tesla's introduction of alternating-current electricity in the 19th century. Friedman quotes a historical fact attested to by Royal Dutch Shell: "Typically it has taken 25 years after commercial introduction for a primary energy form to get a one percent share of the global market." If change of the size and speed now required is to happen, says Friedman, then the world must take unusually aggressive approaches to bring about that progress faster.

The preferred path for developing a global clean-energy system, he writes, is to optimize simultaneously three elements: the generation of the cleanest electrons, efficient use of that energy, and conservation.

Yet the production of electricity in this nation is divided among 3,200 separate utilities, many of them operating under multiple regulatory authorities with an outdated grid system. Texas entrepreneur T. Boone Pickens's multibillion dollar investment to generate electricity with wind systems highlights the problem. His machines are located in the High Plains of Texas and Oklahoma, which contain a major wind corridor. While he can generate massive amounts of electricity, there is no major grid to carry the power to the rest of the nation.

"How do we move forward?" Friedman asks. First, he suggests, we need a goal. He proposes that the world should aim to