

Fourth Rate Estate

Julian Petley

Traditionally, journalism has long been regarded as a 'fourth estate': a central component of democracy, and, in particular, as a means whereby the power of the state can be monitored and, if necessary, limited. According to classic liberal theory, as expounded most famously by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm in *Four Theories of the Press*: 'the underlying purpose of the media was to help discover truth, to assist in the process of solving political and social problems by presenting all manner of evidence and opinion as the basis for decisions'. In order properly to fulfil this purpose, the media needed to be free from government controls or domination, since its prime duty was 'to keep officers of the state from abusing or exceeding their authority. It was to be the watchdog over the workings of democracy, ever vigilant to spot and expose any arbitrary or authoritarian practice'.

In this familiar vision of things, the journalist is a crusader after truth, championing free expression and exposing corruption, oppression, and abuses of official authority. Expressions of this view are legion. For example, in 1821 James Mill called the freedom of the press 'an indispensable security, and the greatest safeguard of the interests of mankind', and the great C.P. Scott argued that journalism 'implies honesty, cleanness, courage, fairness and a sense of duty to the reader and the community ... Neither in what it gives, nor in what it does not give, nor in the mode of presentation, must the unclouded face of truth suffer wrong'. Meanwhile, in his classic study of newspapers, *Dangerous Estate*, Francis Williams called the press 'a minefield through which authority, great and small and at every level of policy and administration, must step warily, conscious always that a false step may blow it up'. Most recently this view has found powerful expression in David Randall's *The Universal Journalist*, in which he argues that the job of the journalist is, above all, to question, and then to:

- Discover and publish information that replaces rumour and speculation.
- Resist or evade government controls.
- Inform, and so empower, voters.
- Subvert those whose authority relies on a lack of public information.
- Scrutinise the action and inaction of governments, elected representatives and public services.
- Scrutinise businesses, their treatment of workers and customers, and the quality of their products.
- Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, providing a voice for those who cannot normally be heard in public.
- Hold up a mirror to society, reflecting its virtues and vices and also debunking its cherished myths
- Ensure that justice is done, is seen to be done and investigations carried out where this is not so.
- Promote the free exchange of ideas, especially by providing a platform for those with philosophies alternative to the prevailing ones.

Now, however admirable these sentiments may be, and however strongly they accord with the way in which many individual journalists do indeed see their role, they are surely quite extraordinarily hard to square with the daily reality of most of the British press. Consider, for example, the majority of papers' attitudes to refugees and asylum seekers, their collusion in the clipping of the coinage of civil liberties post 9/11, their support for a legally dubious invasion of Iraq, their outright dismissal of Clare Short's revelation of the illegal bugging of the U.N. by the secret services, their aggressive stance towards the BBC in its struggles with the government in the Gilligan/Kelly affair, and their hostility towards whistle-blowers such as Catherine Gunn and David

Shayler. All of these, and many more, suggest that we seriously need to reconsider the extent to which the British press is, and, indeed, ever has been, a 'fourth estate'.

For a start, it would be quite mistaken to assume that all newspapers are, or ever have been, driven by anything remotely resembling liberal, let alone progressive, values. As James Curran has clearly shown in *Power Without Responsibility*, the repeal of the stamp duty and of other 'taxes on knowledge' in the nineteenth century was motivated not by governmental conversion to the cause of press freedom; instead, it stemmed from the growing realisation amongst politicians and other members of the establishment that if entrepreneurs and industrialists could be tempted to enter the newspaper market then this could kill off the hated radical press far more effectively than taxes had ever done – by tempting away its readers, by raising the cost of newspaper production (which mass market papers could offset via advertising revenues), or by a combination of the two. That the powers-that-be intended the press to be used as an agent of social control and regulation rather than as a means of popular enlightenment and empowerment is clearly evident from the historical record. Thus, for example, in 1832 we find Bulwer Lytton arguing that: 'we have made a long and fruitless experiment of the gibbet and the hulks. Is it not time to consider whether the printer and his types may not provide better for the peace and honour of a free state, than the gaoler and the hangman. Whether, in one word, cheap knowledge may not be a better political agent than costly punishment'. Later, Gladstone was to declare that: 'the freedom of the press was not merely to be permitted and tolerated, but to be highly prized, for it tended to bring closer together all the national interests and preserve the institutions of the country', but perhaps the clearest indication of the motives of the reformers is provided Milner-Gibson, the president of the Association for the Repeal of the Taxes on Knowledge, who argued in 1850 that repeal would create 'a cheap press in the hands of men of good moral character, of respectability, and of capital' which would give them 'the power of gaining access by newspapers, by faithful record of the facts, to the minds of the working classes'. It is thus hardly surprising that the modern British press, unlike that of many western

democracies, should have always been so overwhelmingly conservative, not to say reactionary, in character.

Furthermore, it would be equally mistaken to regard the media as a whole, and the press in particular, as the detached observers of the political process which liberal theory and professional journalistic ideology suggest. The spheres of journalism and government have never been hermetically sealed off one from another, and indeed have increasingly overlapped as journalists and politicians have grown ever more mutually reliant. Newspapers, in particular, have very definite political and economic agendas and are thus keen to involve themselves actively on the political scene. This, however, is almost never acknowledged by journalists themselves, with the exception of the *Guardian's* press correspondent Roy Greenslade (author of the excellent *Press Gang: How Newspapers Make Profit from Propaganda*) and the same paper's David Walker, who noted in a recent issue of *Journalism* that: 'the power held by journalists and the media organisations for which they work is unperceived or assumed away. The occupational myth of the English political specialist is the dented sword of truth in a Manichean world where a lonely battle is fought for honesty', and pointed out in his contribution to *Media Power, Professionals and Policies* that: 'the exercise of "investigative journalism" rarely extends to the relationship of journalists with each other, with politicians or proprietors'.

The relationship between journalists and politicians is, in fact, much more collusive than either side would like to admit, and has become even more so with the growth of the media into ever more vast corporate entities. The old-fashioned press barons such as Beaverbrook and Rothermere certainly used their papers to pursue specifically political objectives such as Empire free trade, but an owner today is far more likely to be a corporation than a single proprietor and their activities tend to consist in using their media to fawn on politicians who favour them, attack those who don't, and publish stories that further their business interests. As Steven Barnett and Ivor Gaber point out

in *Westminster Tales*, modern media barons like Rupert Murdoch ‘take a more instrumental view based on their analysis of which party will best serve corporate interests and commercial ambitions’. From this there follows ‘a growing interdependence of media entrepreneurs and political parties for their own respective self-advancements. Senior politicians have become more and more convinced (whether rightly or not) of the power of the media and have therefore sought to create harmonious relationships with a few elite owners. Simultaneously, electronic and market developments in the media have raised important legislative issues (for example, on cross-ownership and pay-TV access) which have made it more imperative for owners seeking government favours to ensure productive relationships with ruling parties’.

The classic liberal argument, as we have seen, tends to assume that it is governments which should be the sole object of press vigilance, since, in its view, they are the main seat of power in society. But, in the world in which we now live, corporations and other vast private interests have taken over many of the functions previously performed by the state. And amongst these private interests, media corporations loom ever larger and more powerful. As James Curran has put it: ‘the issue is no longer simply that the media are compromised by their links to big business: the media *are* big business’. This means that those concerned today with questions of press freedom need to concern themselves not only with state-originated forms of censorship such as the Official Secrets Act and the current barrage of anti-terrorism measures but also market-generated forms of censorship such as overweening proprietor power, cross-media concentration, the commodification of information, the privileging of media investors over media audiences, the growth of corporate values at the expense of public service ones, the interdependence of governments and media owners, and so on. As John Keane points out in *The Media and Democracy*: ‘market competition produces market censorship. Private ownership of the media produces private caprice. Those who control the market sphere of producing and distributing information determine, prior to publication, what products

(such as books, magazines, newspapers, television programmes, computer software) will be mass produced and, thus, which opinions officially gain entry into the “marketplace of opinions”.

Doubts about the British press as a fourth estate are given considerable impetus by Bruce Page’s recent book *The Murdoch Archipelago*. We are not exactly short of critical studies of Murdoch’s empire, but what distinguishes Page’s book, and makes it especially relevant to the present context, is its intensely detailed focus on Murdoch’s relationship with political authority - in Australia, Britain, America and China - and on its consequences for journalistic standards in his media. Page’s thesis is that Murdoch’s activities need to be understood in terms of a politico-business model, and that NewsCorp’s core competence is ‘swapping approval with the controllers of the state’. In this vision of things, the function of political journalism is not to act as a watchdog but, on the contrary, consists of maintaining sympathetic relations with authority. The result is the publication of what he calls pseudo-newspapers, and, at worst, as when the Murdoch press helped Thatcher to cover-up the Westland affair or amplified her government’s attack on the Thames TV documentary *Death on the Rock*, a pernicious form of anti-journalism and privatised government propaganda in which, as Page puts it, ‘official lies simply flow in, to be parroted out’. Indeed, Page’s detailed accounts of the intimate workings of the Thatcher/Murdoch axis (which make excellent use of the journals of Woodrow Wyatt, who acted as courtier to both parties) recalls former *Times* editor Charles Douglas-Home’s remarkably candid remark (quoted in *Press Gang*) that: ‘Rupert and Mrs Thatcher consult regularly on every important matter of policy, especially as they relate to his economic and political interests. Around here, he’s jokingly referred to as “Mr Prime Minister”, except that it’s no longer much of a joke. In many respects he is the phantom prime minister of the country’.

The reason for such comprehensive abandonment of the ideals of the Fourth Estate can be summed up in one word: self-interest. Thus Murdoch routinely uses his media to support governments

which support his business interests. So, for example, in the mid 1990s the Labour Party in the UK let it be known that it would drop its traditional hostility to Murdoch's expansionism, and thus, in the 1997 and 2001 General Elections, the *Sun* supported Labour. Murdoch is then handsomely repaid in the 2004 Communications Act, which enables him finally to make significant inroads into British terrestrial television, with the consequence that, during and after the invasion of Iraq the Murdoch press not only acts as a cheerleader for Blair but savagely attacks as 'disloyal' any media outlet daring to voice criticism of the war. The corollary of this kind of mutual back-scratching is, of course, a ferocious hostility to governments and political parties which Murdoch deems inimical to his business interests - witness his Australian papers' pivotal role in the destabilisation of the Gough Whitlam government in 1974-5, and, in Britain, the remorseless hostility of his papers towards the European Union and pre-Blair Labour.

One of the most striking aspects of Murdoch's relationships with political parties is their bare-faced promiscuity - he may be a neo-liberal ideologue who believes passionately in the virtues of the market, but Page's detailed recounting of his global wheeling and dealing convincingly demonstrates that, when calculating which parties his media will support, their ideological complexion counts for nothing compared with whether or not their media policies are Murdoch-friendly. Particularly significant, in this respect, are Murdoch's dealings with the Chinese. As Andrew Neil argues in *Full Disclosure*, these 'required a wrenching U-turn in attitudes towards China since the mid-eighties' and amply demonstrate how 'he will always moderate his political fundamentalism if it suits his business strategy'.

In 1993 Murdoch, eager to colonise the potentially vast Chinese television market, took a controlling stake in Satellite Television Asia Region (Star TV), and, within months, was playing the familiar role of the Great Liberator, arguing that: 'Advances in the technology of communications have proved an unambiguous threat to totalitarian regimes ... Satellite

broadcasting makes it possible for information-hungry residents of many closed societies to by pass state-controlled television channels'. So much for the rhetoric. In reality, however, Murdoch has done everything possible, including indulging in the most craven forms of self-censorship, to ingratiate himself with China's communist leaders. Thus after acquiring Star he immediately threw off BBC World, as its coverage of the Tiananmen protests had annoyed them. Similarly, *The Times'* Jonathan Mirsky quit when the paper refused repeatedly to run articles in which he revealed that dissidence in China was widespread, and when Murdoch discovered that his company Harper Collins was intending to publish a book (*East and West*) by former Hong Kong Governor Chris Patten which was critical of the Chinese gerontocracy, he insisted that the contract was terminated. As he put it: 'Let someone else annoy them'. He also invested \$5.4 million into the *People's Daily*, and Harper Collins published the English translation of Deng Rong's hagiography of her father Deng Xiaoping. As Jamie Davis, head of Star TV in China was quoted as saying in the *Financial Times*, 9 January 2003: 'everything in China is about relationships and about mutual benefit. I think Rupert Murdoch has a very good relationship with the Chinese government ... and we work hard at it'. And in March 2001, James Murdoch, who was then running NewsCorp's Asian operations, told a Los Angeles business conference that negative media portrayals of the Chinese regime were 'destabilising forces' and 'very, very dangerous for the Chinese government'. However, as Page argues: 'a good thing about Murdoch's Chinese activities is that no democratic politician who agrees to examine them can entertain honest doubt about the character of the operation' .

Page concludes that: 'dictatorship and state monopoly do not repel him, provided NewsCorp can cut a deal with the system. Outfits like the BBC, however, under any political or economic system, are competitors which it is important to undermine'. Thus Murdoch is much less exercised by real totalitarians than by those he calls 'liberal totalitarians'. These turn out to be anybody who stands in the way of his amassing ever more media power: the Australian Broadcasting Commission, the Independent Television Commission, the BBC, the Office of Fair Trading, the Federal

Communications Commission, and so on; in other words all those responsible for structures devised by democratic states in order limit abuses of media power.

The paradox is, however, as Page all too clearly demonstrates, that Murdoch has repeatedly run rings round the 'liberal totalitarians', acquiring *The Times* and *Sunday Times* in spite of regulations aimed at limiting the concentration of the UK press; establishing Sky in Luxembourg, outside the jurisdiction of British regulators, even though it was aimed at British audiences; taking over British Satellite Broadcasting to form BSkyB, thus establishing a monopoly satellite broadcasting system in complete contravention of rules which, if the political will to enforce them had existed, could have prevented this from happening; changing his nationality from Australian to American in order to buy Fox, thus thumbing his nose at the rules which prevent non-Americans from buying American media companies; relentlessly lobbying British politicians and civil servants to ensure that BSkyB is effectively immunised from any obligation to carry a majority of EU-produced programmes under the Television Sans Frontieres directive; and effectively bribing the present Labour government to formulate, and then to force through in the face of considerable cross-party opposition, a Communications Bill expressly designed to further his own interests. As Murdoch's political relationships across the world have all too clearly demonstrated, in Page's view: 'market dominion in modern states is unsustainable without political protection or collaboration'. So much for the 'free' market, then. And some 'totalitarians' these all-too-liberal liberals turned out to be!

Page concludes that the positioning of Murdoch's papers is motivated above all by corporate tactics, and that this leaves an indelible stain on their journalism, one which clearly marks it out as quite different from the kinds of journalism to be found elsewhere: 'the politically neutral BBC, the liberal *Guardian*, the illiberal *Daily Mail* and the conservative *Wall Street Journal* all resemble each other more than any of them resemble Newscorp media output. All, in utterly dissimilar ways, have worked within the constitution of the state to consolidate their independence from it.

NewsCorp is about eroding the boundaries between the state power and media operations'. Of course, politicians are equally culpable for having allowed, and indeed, in some cases, encouraged, the development of this situation, but as Page points out, as often as not, they are moved by fear as much as by admiration. Nonetheless, whatever their motives, they now, Page argues, find themselves revolving with Murdoch's media in what he calls 'a dance of folly which has at least the potential to be a dance of death for democracy'. Were this entirely cynical, self-interested, instrumental view of journalism to spread to the press as a whole, the idea of the press as a fourth estate (never, as we have seen, an entirely convincing one in the first place as far as the British press is concerned) would need to be put to sleep once and for all.

