Up to a Point, Lord Copper: The Eternal Corruption of Media Power

by Patrick Keeney (March 2025)

Illustration by Quentin Blake, 2015

Prince Harry's "monumental" victory over Rupert Murdoch's UK newspaper group is a significant landmark in the ongoing battle between public figures and media empires accused of invasive practices.

The settlement, which includes the publisher's first-ever admission of unlawful actions by Murdoch's *The Sun* and an "unequivocal apology," is a personal win for Harry and a symbolic acknowledgment of the unethical methods employed in pursuit of stories.

The victory raises broader questions about the influence and accountability of powerful media owners such as Murdoch, who seems almost Dickensian in his villainy, a caricature of the unscrupulous press baron who thrives on controversy and division.

The very nature of controlling the means of mass communication seems to attract those with oversized egos, ruthless dispositions, and a pathological thirst for power. These men, cloaked in the guise of journalistic champions, often seek not to inform the public but to manipulate it for their own political and financial gain.

But Murdoch is far from an anomaly. His template was Lord Copper, the fictional media tycoon in Evelyn Waugh's 1937 satirical masterpiece *Scoop.* Copper is a grotesque figure, embodying media moguls' vanity, ignorance, and pomposity. But Waugh didn't pluck Lord Copper out of thin air. He modeled him after the real-life Canadian media baron, Max Aitken, or Lord Beaverbrook, who epitomized the dubious ethics and unabashed ambition that seems to come with the territory.

Lord Copper is surrounded by craven minions who are too afraid to contradict even his most ludicrous assertions. Disagreement was not an option. Instead, Copper's employees—including the hapless reporter William Boot, a mild-mannered and utterly unprepared nature columnist—developed a coping mechanism of

equivocation. When Lord Copper, in his infinite wisdom, proclaimed something patently absurd—say, that the moon was indeed made of green cheese—Boot would dutifully reply with the deferential refrain, ‘Up to a point, Lord Copper.’

The “Up to a point, Lord Copper” ethos redounds in the echo chambers of today’s media empires. Whether in tabloid newsrooms, on cable news or in the hallowed halls of ostensibly highbrow institutions, the impulse to placate power and avoid uncomfortable truths remains as strong as ever.

The tools of sycophancy may have evolved—replaced now by virtue signalling, ideological conformity, and algorithmic appeasement—but the principle remains unchanged. Where once media barons surrounded themselves with trembling yes-men, today’s journalistic courtiers carefully curate their opinions to align with the ruling elite’s approved narratives. Whether through self-censorship, selective framing, or the strategic omission of inconvenient facts, modern journalists understand that deviating from the prescribed orthodoxy can be professionally fatal.

The harsh reality is that telling the truth—especially when it contradicts institutional interests—can be a career-ending move. Those who stray too far from the accepted script risk exile from the industry, not with a dramatic denunciation, but through the quieter means of deplatforming, professional sidelining, or algorithmic invisibility.

Like the best satire, Evelyn Waugh’s *Scoop* was not just comedy but prophecy. It foretold the rise of men like Murdoch, who transformed journalism into a hybrid of entertainment and propaganda, erasing the line between objective reporting and ideological warfare.

But Murdoch was merely the loudest symptom of a deeper rot. The same dynamic that produced his media empire also animates today’s slicker, more insidious operators—outlets that claim

intellectual credibility while massaging reality into a more palatable form for their audience. Whether in tabloid sensationalism or highbrow media's polished pretensions, the game remains the same: shape the narrative, serve the powerful, and punish those who dare to dissent.

The sad truth is that Rupert Murdoch is not alone in our media landscape. Indeed, for all his tabloid vulgarity, brazen political manipulation, and delight in the lowbrow, Murdoch's style makes him an easy, almost cartoonish target for criticism. He embodies the garish stereotype of the press baron: brash, shameless, and unapologetically ideological.

But it's a mistake to assume that Murdoch represents the apex of media corruption. Far more dangerous and infinitely more insidious are the slicker, more polished forms of deceit practiced by the so-called "respectable" media, particularly those who wear the mask of objectivity while serving as the regime's loyal scribes.

Enter *The New York Times*.

Unlike Murdoch's tabloids, which shout their agenda like carnival barkers, *The New York Times* cloaks its biases in a veneer of gravitas, intellect, and moral authority. It speaks not with the crude bluster of tabloid sensationalism but with the measured, orotund cadence of an Ivy League professor in a hushed seminar room—his carefully chosen words imparting an air of quiet, assured sophistication. Here, ideology is not declared but implied, woven seamlessly into the fabric of "objective" reporting, leaving readers with the comforting illusion that they are absorbing not propaganda but enlightened discourse.

Murdoch's populist tabloids offer crude distortions of the truth; the *NYT* offers the more refined variety draped in respectability and what the *bien-pensants* insist is "progress." Its reporting crafts narratives that serve the

regime's interests, not by distorting the facts outright, but by framing them in ways that make dissent seem unthinkable and compliance appear virtuous.

Like Murdoch, this is not journalism in the service of truth. It is journalism in the service of *power,* an exercise in manufacturing consent through subtle omissions, selective emphasis, and the careful cultivation of ideological conformity.

And this is where *The Times* and Murdoch diverge most dramatically. Murdoch's tabloids might peddle gossip, outrage, and an unrepentant right-wing agenda, but they do so in a way that is unmistakable. You know you're being spun; perhaps you even relish its brazen transparency and partisanship. No one watches Sean Hannity for a disinterested analysis of the day's news.

The Times, on the other hand, deals in the currency of plausibility. It cloaks its agendas in the language of enlightened discourse, presenting its biases as self-evident truths. Its editors don't seek to persuade you of their worldview; they presume you already share it. If you don't, well, that's because you're on the wrong side of history, an unsophisticated hick and bigot who lacks the sophistication of the *NYT*.

The New York Times comforts the ruling class by offering an intellectual framework that legitimizes its policies while soothing its readership with the illusion of moral and intellectual superiority, all under the guise of a disinterested, above-the-fray stance. Meanwhile, dissent is swiftly dismissed as ignorance, bigotry, or, worse still—a symptom of the dreaded "populist" contagion.

While Murdoch may serve as the media world's court jester, institutions like *The New York Times* assume the role of high priests, sanctifying the regime's every move. Their corruption

is subtler, smoother, and far more insidious precisely because it is harder to discern. Such media organs are the Alcibiades of our age—brilliant, seductive, and utterly self-serving.

If you cast your mind back to your undergraduate philosophy courses, you might recall Alcibiades, Socrates' most gifted yet most treacherous student. Charismatic, ambitious, and dangerously persuasive, he embodied the paradox of intellect unmoored from principle. In much the same way, *The New York Times* wields its wit, intelligence, and charm not in the pursuit of truth but in the service of perpetuating power. Unlike Murdoch, who is content to influence the conversation, they seek to control it entirely—dictating *what* is said and *what can* be said.

So why does this pattern repeat itself? Perhaps the answer lies in the intoxicating mix of power and narrative control. Media barons are not content to sit on the sidelines; they want to be players in the drama of politics and society, shaping not only what we think but how we think.

And they do so not out of a sense of civic duty but simply because they can. After all, why settle for being a mere spectator when, like the Red Queen, you can stride across the chessboard, directing the action and dictating the next moves? After all, the view is much better from the throne when you're the one deciding which pawns to sacrifice.

Better, that is, until the courts call your bluff.

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Patrick Keeney is a Canadian academic and associate editor of C2C Journal.

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