

# What Did Rupert Ever Do For Us? (Polis Summer School guest blog)

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*BBC's media correspondent for 24 years, Torin Douglas, has witnessed the big transformations of British news media. In a talk to the [Polis Summer School](#) one of the key factors he pinpointed was Rupert Murdoch as the key figure in changing the British media landscape. Polis Summer School student Jesper Birch reports on Torin's talk.*

## **The pioneering side of Murdoch**

In his talk Torin Douglas remembered Murdoch's speech in 1989, when he described those who ran UK television as suffers of "the British disease". As he saw it they were protected by public subsidies and state privileges and crowded out market competition. Murdoch became a pioneer when he broke the powers of the newspaper print unions and later on rearranged the UK television sector. He said he wanted to create a democracy by marketplace and give journalism to the people rather than a stuffy British elite. A central point made by Douglas was that Murdoch's pioneering work also benefited his competitors, so British media should in this respect certainly be grateful to Rupert Murdoch.

## **The Murdoch-Thatcher tandem**

Murdoch could not have done this without the political work and support from Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher tamed the trade unions and brought in privatization laws. Murdoch took advantage and moved his national newspapers to a new plant which could benefit from new computer technology. According to Andrew Neil, the then-editor of Sunday Times, Rupert Murdoch told him that "he had squared Mrs Thatcher as far as the police were concerned, that he'd had a guarantee from her that enough police would be made available to keep the company going about its lawful business".

## **The corrupt side of Murdoch**

Yet in the last couple of years the phone hacking saga has led to the end of The News of the World – Britain's best-selling newspaper and part of Murdoch's giant global news conglomerate News Cooperation. Editors and journalists of the newspaper were accused of phone hacking politicians, celebrities and ordinary people in order to make sensational headlines. Obviously, this has raised major ethical and legal concerns and Murdoch has been criticized for building an empire based on a corrupt foundation.

On the one side, Rupert Murdoch was certainly the man who saw what was coming and unchained British journalism from state control. He wanted to decentralize media power. On the other side, he is also the man who is arguably responsible for a corrupt media culture typified by the phone hacking saga. So while Murdoch transformed British media in a positive way, you may argue that he sacrificed some core values on his way, including perhaps, journalist thrust and credibility.

*This article by Polis Summer School student Jesper Birch*

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