**Murdoch takes the WSJ**

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[**Invasion of the Body Snatchers: another good journalist lost, along with The Wall Street Journal**](http://www.tpmcafe.com/blog/coffeehouse/2007/jul/06/invasion_of_the_body_snatchers_another_good_journalist_lost_along_with_the_wall_street_journal)



**By** [**Jim Sleeper**](http://www.tpmcafe.com/user/20017/recent)

Stepping lightly into his grave as an American writer in the grand cemetery he and other well-known journalists have designed for the American republic, TIME's Eric Pooley seems as ecstatic as a jihadist ascending to another world. It's frighteningly instructive to read his July 9 [apologia-cum-hagiography on Rupert Murdoch](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1638438,00.html) for what it tells us about how American journalism is changing, especially now that Murdoch has virtually won his bid for The Wall Street Journal and its parent company Dow Jones, according to sources on the company's board. The [deal is done](http://www.thebusinessonline.com/Document.aspx?id=F3C68A81-C541-4FA2-AC53-A3F052978B94), they say, though Dow Jones is denying it, perhaps pending a formal announcement expected next week. But even if it fails, something has been lost in the anticipatory applause of people like Pooley.

At least Pooley, TIME's star composer of breathless encomia to great men (like Rudy Giuliani after 9/11) who've broken the rules and borne lesser mortals' uncomprehending rage to change the world, paused to take note of the rage at Rupert, the latest, weirdest addition to his pantheon.

“The notion of this tabloid terror controlling the world's leading business journal [The Wall Street Journal] is being met with ferocious opposition,” Pooley allows, assigning the protesters their seats in the past ([including me](http://www.tpmcafe.com/blog/coffeehouse/2007/jun/18/rupert_vs_the_republic), presumably). “Some of the opposition is principled, some of it is sanctimonious, and some of it seems driven by a tangle of ideological and commercial motives. Each day brings another investigative story about Murdoch using his media properties to boost his business interests, reward his friends and punish his rivals, and each story carries the message that this man will destroy the Journal by using its hugely respected news pages as his personal fief.

“Of course,” Pooley adds, waving off those critics, “the Journal’s editorial pages are already more conservative than Murdoch.” Actually, those pages are less conservative in any Burkean or Buckleyan sense than they are fanatically delusional, and Pooley knows that the presence of a few editorial bats in the Dow Jones attic – the batty James Taranto, John Fund, and the ghost of Robert Whitewater Bartley – didn’t justify anyone’s selling the whole mansion to the Count Dracula of journalism.

The real reason, Pooley argues, is that the mansion itself is old-fashioned and decrepit, at least by the go-go marketing standards his own Time-Warner Corporation shares with Murdoch’s News Corporation. Murdoch is the herald of an economic and civic climate change larger than himself, and Pooley is hot to introduce us to the inevitable. He hints often at the intimacy of his access to the Great Man, though not so loudly that you wonder why he was granted it. Time-Warner and the News Corporation are rivals, but they’re partners in weaning us of old-fashioned civic republican morals. They do that subliminally every day.

So let’s try to notice what’s getting lost here, including Pooley himself, who used to care about America’s republican integrity. He’s surfing the tidal wave of our collective corporate destiny by rendering Rupert as a charming rogue and great explorer of this century’s vasty deeps, a pirate/pilgrim as awesome as Columbus or Cortez, and never mind the sins and sicknesses they brought with them. The profile reflects a shift in American journalism, which is giving up the ghost of civic-republicanism to follow our new conglomerate masters’ obsession with market share uber alles.

Pooley offers a sprightly tutorial on this to all who aren’t yet clued in -- a terrific read for Time-Warner’s long-sought demographic, twenty-somethings who are sloughing off the musty liberal arts they wasted four years getting graded on in college. (I include here those balding, 50’ish twenty-somethings who zoom past me on the Meritt Parkway in their BMWs and armored vehicles; there seem to be millions of them).

Pooley waves aside any lingering suspicion that we Americans shouldn’t be just speculators and self-marketers but citizens who require good journalism as much as we do oxygen to achieve a common good. He and Murdoch are administering euthanasia to all that, and in this quick joint venture they do it more entertainingly than Jack Kevorkian:

“‘They're taking five billion dollars out of me and want to keep control,’" Rupert Murdoch was saying into the phone, "’in an industry in crisis! They can't sell their company and still control it--that's not how it works. I'm sorry!’

“It was a little before 5 o'clock on Friday, June 22, and the chairman of News Corp.--the world's third largest media conglomerate, with a value of $68 billion, and one of the few mega-corporations controlled by a single individual--was at his desk on the eighth floor of his midtown Manhattan headquarters, trying to shore up a deal he had dreamed about for a decade…. He was speaking in soft bursts to an investment banker on the other end of the line. Murdoch had stripped off his jacket and tie, and his thin, dyed-brown hair was scattered across his scalp. His controversial $5 billion deal to acquire Dow Jones & Co. and its crown jewel, the Wall Street Journal, was in danger of crashing. Murdoch was playing poker: to get the deal back on track, he had to threaten to walk--and mean it.”

He’s plays more than poker. In 2005, Murdoch outbid Viacom for MySpace at a price few thought it was worth, but soon he “looked like an Internet visionary,” Pooley tells us, as he told Murdoch himself. “‘I love being called that,’" Murdoch answers, “‘but the truth is, I'm just lucky and nimble.’” He “generates his own good fortune by being perhaps the most gifted opportunist in media,” echoes Pooley, calling him “the last of the true media moguls, the one who's still building -- grabbing Dow Jones, dreaming about trading MySpace for a big chunk of Yahoo!, trying to launch a Polish TV network. News Corp.'s voting stock, of which the Murdoch family owns 31%, has gone up 18% in the past year, making him worth $9 billion.”

“He lives like an old-fashioned tycoon too,” Pooley swoons, “hopscotching the planet on his 737 and recharging on his yacht off St. Tropez. Recent stop: London, where he got thrown from a horse (but didn't break anything--too busy). His likeness was unveiled at the National Portrait Gallery and he threw a party in Kensington Gardens for 400 friends, including incoming British Prime Minister Gordon Brown….”

But what about those sins and sicknesses? Isn’t Murdoch a right-winger who’s corrupting news and public discourse? Naw, Pooley assures us:

“Murdoch isn't a party-line guy. He's a pragmatist. He likes strong politicians and change agents and winners;... he has supported moderates like Tony Blair and Hillary Clinton. But he has a stubborn populist streak, and his populism finds an outlet on Fox News, a channel that gives voice to angry middle-aged white guys.” Then Pooley lets Rupert himself do the spin: “‘[I]f you look at our general news, do we put on things which favor the right rather than the left? I don't know…. We don't think we do. We've always insisted we don't. I don't think we do. Aw, it's subjective. Neither side admits it.’

“Has Murdoch just said what I think he said?” Pooley asks disingenuously. “Has he flirted with an admission that Fox News skews right?” Since we can’t respond to this phony question, he does: “If so, Murdoch quickly backs away. ‘We don’t think we do.’”

It’s Pooley who keeps backing away from glints of skepticism he musters for theatrical effect while setting up Murdoch’s responses with his soft-ball questions. Compare with New York Times columnist [Paul Krugman](http://select.nytimes.com/2007/06/29/opinion/29krugman.html?_r=1&oref=login&pagewanted=print). Noting that 60 percent of Americans have believed that Iraq and Al Qaeda were linked, that W.M. D. had been found, or that world public opinion favored the war with Iraq, Krugman reported that only 23 percent of PBS and NPR audiences “believed any of these untrue things, but the number was 80 percent among those relying primarily on Fox News…. [T]wo-thirds of Fox devotees believed that the U.S. had ‘found clear evidence in Iraq that Saddam Hussein was working closely with the Al Qaeda terrorist organization.’”

Pooley doesn’t report that Murdoch became a U.S. citizen in 1985, to get around rules limiting foreign ownership. By my lights that makes him even more un-American than Dick Cheney for rousing of 3500 young Americans to die in desert sands. But maybe citizenship is as marginal to the brave new world of conglomerate media as Columbus’ Italian-Jewish nationality was to the Spanish empire-builders Ferdinand and Isabella.

What about Murdoch’s degrading his news outlets? Krugman calls him “an opportunist who exploits a rule-free media environment — one created, in part, by conservative political power — by slanting news coverage to favor whoever he thinks will serve his business interests.” Now, *there’s* a conservatism the Journal’s editorial-page bat-heads champion, whatever their jitters about Murdoch’s telling them how to do it. And it’s what the paper’s brave news side has kept at bay. Again Pooley bobs and weaves: “Murdoch waves away the past and cuts to the heart of the matter: the Journal. ‘Why would I spend $5 billion for something in order to wreck it?’ he asks” – as does Pooley, who fleetingly acknowledges Rupert’s nasty record but just as quickly portrays the Journal as a basket case that only a market visionary like Murdoch could save.

Pooley glances at Murdoch’s phony populism but then veers back to calling him a bold explorer-inventor, unlike “sanctimonious” journalists – that word again, Pooley’s word – who still consider serious reporting the lifeblood of democracy. Murdoch’s own editors aren’t sanctimonious, of course; one of them throws Pooley their line: Murdoch may meddle, the editor allows, but “if he’s not interested, then were is the money going to come from…. if Dow Jones wants to grow globally?”

“Show me the money.” That shuts up most would-be do-gooders these days. But what if “growing globally,” like growing imperially, involves dying internally? What if only aroused republics can channel or limit that growth? What if that requires honest reporting? Pooley never asks, because Murdoch shows he tolerates only the doom-eager populism he pumped up for Iraq.

“‘Journalists should think of themselves as outside the Establishment, and owners can't be too worried about what they're told at their country clubs,’’” quoth Rupert (a bit sanctimoniously). But he doesn’t mean it, and Pooley, realizing this, pretends to doubt him, calling him “the man who influences Prime Ministers and Presidents and still poses as a scrappy outsider.” But he adds just as quickly that “associates say he's finally considering his legacy and wants to run the Journal impeccably to upgrade his reputation….”

Murdoch “scoffs at the notion. ‘I'm not looking for a legacy, and you'll never shut up the critics. I've been around 50 years. When you're a catalyst for change, you make enemies--and I'm proud of the ones I've got.’ Murdoch has invested billions in newspapers when few others were willing, but he has also kept them alive through a lowest-common denominator approach typified by the trashy Sun, with its topless Page 3 girls…. Murdoch wouldn't be Murdoch if he didn't love sticking it to sanctimonious J-school toffs. ‘When the Journal gets its Page 3 girls,’ he jokes late one night, ‘we'll make sure they have M.B.A.s.’”

So, laugh it all off, okay? But notice, too, what you were supposed to have forgotten during Pooley’s pirouetting: By crowning Rupert an empire builder, however scrappy, he’s buried any thought that journalism must remain outside the establishment with anything more than the fake populism of war machines and of topless girls.

Pooley wheels in more apologists: “‘Those who say he'll wreck the Journal are in for a surprise,’” a British professor of journalism tells him. “‘What they miss is that he really does distinguish between his tabloids and his serious papers…. At his serious papers, there's much more of a discussion.’" Much more of a discussion? “‘There's such a thing as a popular newspaper and an unpopular élite newspaper,’” Murdoch concurs. “‘They play different roles. We have both kinds. Just like we have the Fox network with American Idol and 24, and we also have the National Geographic Channel. It's hard for outsiders to understand that.’”

Is it hard to understand that Fox does a lot more damage to the republic than National Geographic does good?

Pooley has given Murdoch his say as if he had no other way to be heard. But Rupert Murdoch is a liar, and Eric Pooley is his enabler. Everything in this profile, circling the globe in TIME’s foreign editions and online, is disingenuous and self-serving. You read lie after lie and wait for Pooley to challenge Murdoch’s credibility as Krugman did and as the Columbia Journalism Review did in [an editorial on his promises not to ruin the Journal](http://www.cjr.org/editorial/its_his_nature.php):

“A familiar fable tells of a scorpion that asks a frog to carry him across a river. The frog is sensibly fearful of getting stung. But the scorpion is persuasive, pointing out that if he stings the frog, they will both sink into the water and die. Why would he do such a thing? So the frog agrees. Midway across the stream, the scorpion stings. The dying frog asks: Why? It's my nature, the scorpion explains…..

“We appreciate that the Bancrofts [the Journal’s owners] have come to realize that Dow Jones needs a fresh direction. And it is easy for outsiders to ask people to walk away from a $5 billion offer. But this is their moment in history. We hope they find a way to keep this American treasure away from Rupert Murdoch, who will smile even as he raises the stinger.”

Surely he’s smiling this morning. But let’s assume that for the first year after he takes over, Murdoch will pump more resources into the Journal than it has ever enjoyed, transform its outreach, and sustain its reportorial independence, just enough to get his critics on record saying they were wrong. Then the Journal will begin its inexorable, tawdry decline into a Murdochian half-life, complete with a fantastic position for Pooley.

I get an "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" feeling watching the transformation of writers – Nicholas Lemann at The New Yorker, Ronald Brownstein at the Los Angeles Times -- who used to care about reporting for a republican polity they apparently no longer believe in. It isn’t just Murdoch who has swept away their old coordinates as free citizens. A tidal wave of conglomerate consolidation and relentlessly strange and intrusive marketing has done that.

Joseph Schumpeter wrote about capitalism’s powers of “creative destruction;” Pooley names Murdoch one of the creators. What he can’t afford to tell us, or himself, is that tidal waves are awesome but meaninglessly destructive and that the empire builders riding them hurtle from the sublime to the ridiculous. Sooner or later, as Jonathan Schell demonstrates brilliantly in his The Unconquerable World, better people show them -- as Ghandi did the British, King the American South, Mandela the Afrikaners, and Havel, Michnick and Walesa the Soviets -- that empires aren’t really as strong as tidal waves, or as irresistible as democratic hopes.