



The Murdochization of News

Judge Mark Painter

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Recently I was on a "working vacation" in Florida, where my hotel furnished the *Wall Street Journal* to its guests. I am a former long-term subscriber to the WSJ. I read it for many years, but I no longer do.

Since Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. bought the WSJ, it has become part of what I call the Murdochization of news. This process seems to have two parts. The first is to cause controversy by employing (formerly) low-paid dunderheads to appear on Fox TV and say ridiculous things. The level of discourse is staggeringly puerile.

On that same vacation, I was treated—on the Tiki bar TV—to Glenn Beck explaining the difference between the American and French Revolutions. I've read Edmund Burke; Glenn Beck is no Edmund Burke. One hilarious sidelight was watching the captioning—first it was "robes Pierre," then "ropes Pierre," and finally "Robespierre." Beck even had a blackboard, of all things, to conjure up a professorial image.

The blackboard leads to the second part of Murdochization: cheap reporting and editing. In the WSJ that morning I found this tidbit: "BUENOS AIRES—Argentina is enduring its biggest inflation surge to start the year in two decades, posing a challenge for the government's newly named central bank president who is viewed skeptically by financial markets."

That convoluted gem has forty-three words—about double the limit for readable sentences—and tests at grade level 20.3 in readability. That means that only people who have completed more than twenty years of formal schooling—postdoctoral studies—are likely to understand it on first reading. I had to back up twice. How will Argentina start the year in two decades?

Newspapers used to employ copy editors—unsung people who would sit behind a desk at the office editing and proofreading articles. They

would not only correct grammar, style, and usage, but would also verify facts and ask questions. They didn't get bylines, but they ensured—as best they could with short deadlines—that stories were grammatically and factually correct.

Most copy editors are now history, or are so overwhelmed with the number of stories they must edit that copy typically goes from the reporter's laptop or cell phone to print or online with scant review. Minimal editing. No fact checking. What Philip Graham (*Washington Post* publisher 1946–1963) called "the first rough draft of history," is now just that: rough.

Maybe the WSJ still has a few copy editors, but they can't catch everything. So many newspapers have eliminated so many jobs that the quality of output has dropped precipitously.

The downsizing and Murdochization continues. The only consolation is that it can't get much worse: there are few newspaper people left to fire.



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