



**THE BLOG** 07/25/2011 02:21 pm ET | Updated Sep 24, 2011

# What Story Is the Murdoch Story?



By Marty Kaplan

Following several days of coaching by lawyers and PR experts, it must have been really rattling for Rupert and James Murdoch when showtime arrived to learn that the parliamentary committee questioning them would not permit opening statements. Framing, after all, is the name of the game. To control the package that the narrative comes in is to control the meaning of the story. No wonder Rupert Murdoch felt compelled to interrupt his son at the top of his first answer to say, “This is the most humble day of my life.” That was the frame his team had planned, not some “what did you know, and when did you know it?” storyline that the committee wanted to pursue. It would have spoiled everything to let Watergate frame the day, and not King Lear.

But to my ear, Murdoch’s intervention was one odd note off. Why “humble,” and not “humbling”? “Humbling” would have had Murdoch acceding to forces beyond his control, would have him admitting to past arrogance, would have conveyed the sting of just deserts. Declaring it “the most humble day of my life” was too on-the-nose, the error of a neophyte screenwriter who tells rather than shows. It came across as a naked attempt to pick the day’s sound bite, an image consultant’s advice blurted out as a talking point. Interrupting his son in order to say it was an eruption of the very arrogance that he intended to declare extinct.

Whether Murdoch’s occasional befuddlement, his inability to recall details, his long pauses and his nodding off were evidence that this 80-year-old was no threat to anyone, or instead a sign that he’d been studying Jessica Tandy’s performance in *Driving Miss Daisy*, has been debated in the days since the hearing. It is hard to square the take-no-prisoners Murdoch, the win-at-all-costs global mogul, with the almost pitiable witness at the table. In theory it might have been effective political theater to give the boss of Fleet Street a taste of his own medicine, but Jonnie Marbles won few cheers for attempting to pie a doddering lion in winter.

Murdoch clearly chafed under the burden of his storyline. He was unable to deliver all the dialogue that “the most humble day” required of him. Even an insincere acceptance of responsibility was beyond him, let alone an admission of blame. “When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down/And ask of thee

forgiveness,” Lear tells Cordelia at the end; offered the chance to say whether the buck stops with him, the most that Murdoch could muster was, “Nope.” He was a victim. It was the people he relied on who had let him down, he said, not the culture he cultivated that had twisted them. He could barely conceal his impatience with members of Parliament who expect an emperor as mighty as Rupert Murdoch to pay more than one percent of his attention to his tabloids, which puts a pretty low ceiling on how humble a day it could actually have been. It was Yom without Kippur, humility without atonement, repentance without guilt, sorrow with nothing to be sorry for.

The media covering this story, of course, have had their own narratives to retail. *Citizen Kane* has proven to be an irresistible analogy. A ruthless publisher exploits the public’s appetite for sensationalism to inflame profitable jingoism and make himself the most powerful and feared man in the country. Joseph Mankiewicz’s script punishes Kane by showing that money can’t buy love, and that power is no substitute for the lost innocence of childhood. By contrast, the news coverage of Murdoch’s billions, of his marriage to a woman two generations younger than him, and of his global power over politicians and public opinion has been fairly fawning. If the Murdoch story has a Rosebud, it’s Millie Dowler, the kidnapped and murdered girl whose voicemail was hacked by his *News of the World*. Just as Orson Welles’ audience needed William Randolph Hearst cut down to size, avenging the predatory grief inflicted on an innocent English family is the engine of the Citizen Murdoch movie’s plot.

But from the moment that Carl Bernstein declared that this saga had the makings of another Watergate, the dominant media narrative has been *All the President’s Men*. It’s a riveting procedural. The cover-up is proving to be more damaging than the crime. Each day’s news brings a fresh harvest of investigative journalism, with the *Guardian* playing the role that the *Washington Post* did in the ‘70s, and the *New York Times* lapping at its heels. The suspense is how far all this will go — whether police corruption, and Prime Minister David Cameron’s appointing the British equivalent of Roger Ailes as his press secretary, will bring down Cameron’s government; whether News Corp — an American company — has violated American laws, making its executives susceptible to U.S. prosecution; whether the dereliction of duty by Murdoch’s board that has been revealed by this scandal will cause them to turn on him; whether shareholder panic will fracture his family’s grip on the company; whether Murdoch, like Nixon, will fall.

My favorite character in this story is Rebekah Brooks, the *News of the World* editor whom Murdoch made chief executive of News International, and to whom Murdoch pointed, when asked what his top priority was in the hacking scandal, saying, “This one.” There is nothing like an English accent to make bulls—t sound like Shakespeare. I had never heard Rebekah Brooks’ voice until she testified to the parliamentary committee just after the Murdochs’ appearance, and I suspect that it was (no doubt unfairly) her unruly and abundant red hair, as well as the *News of the World*’s foul tone, that made me imagine that she would sound like Eliza Doolittle at the start of *Pygmalion*. But it was the King’s English she spoke at the hearing, making me wonder if I was being too hard on her. What brought me back to reality was a delicious anecdote the *New York Times* reported. From the moment that the *News of the World* had come under fire, her response had been to leak damaging stories about her Fleet Street competitors. Everyone does it: that was her defense. It’s not quite “I was just following orders,” but it’s right up there. According to the *Times*, “At a dinner party, Lady Rothermere, the wife of the billionaire owner of the *Daily Mail*, overheard

Ms. Brooks saying that the *Mail* was just as culpable as the *News of the World*. ‘We didn’t break the law,’ Lady Rothermere said.... Ms. Brooks asked who Lady Rothermere thought she was, ‘Mother Teresa?’”

The Watergate narrative has a widely-accepted moral, an upbeat interpretation of its meaning: The system works. But as it turns out, the system doesn’t work. If it did, the Supreme Court would not today be busily eliminating every law on the books aimed at preventing billionaires and media oligarchs from controlling campaigns and elections; nor would states with more livestock than people, and ideologues with more zeal than reason, be able to take our government hostage; nor would a financial sector whose recklessness destroyed our economy be able to continue relying on no-fault bailouts. The coziness of money and power in Britain that the Murdoch story shows, the corruption of the press and the police that it documents, the persistence of a tiny elite that runs things no matter what party is in charge: this pathology, alas, is not confined to the other side of the pond.

I keep wanting melodramas like this Murdoch episode to shock us into admitting how things really are, instead of calming us with an illusion of accountability and a myth about the resilience of our institutions. I’m not holding out for a story like *The Matrix*, where Neo learns the truth and joins the rebels. But it’d be heartening if there were a better alternative to that than, “Forget it, Jake. It’s Chinatown.”

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you’d like.*

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