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# A pressing case for standing up to Rupert Murdoch's bullying

Robert Manne  
September 2, 2011  
OPINION

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'This power to distort political debate must be challenged and broken.' Photo: Reuters

## The shameless actions of News Ltd are a threat to our democracy.

NEWS Ltd owns 70 per cent of the circulation of major newspapers in Australia. If Rupert Murdoch, the chairman and chief executive of News Corporation, were an apolitical or a distant figure, this might not matter, but he has a powerful set of ideological beliefs and is determined to maintain tight control over the political line of all his papers on issues that interest him.

Politically engaged citizens have a plethora of accessible sources of information on the internet, but News Ltd's capacity to influence the opinions of the vast majority of less engaged citizens - whose political understanding is shaped directly by the popular newspapers and indirectly through the commercial radio and television programs that rely on newspapers for content and, more deeply, for the way they interpret the world - is unjustifiable.

The company's domination of our newspaper market poses a real and present danger to the health of Australian democracy.

Take, for example, the reported discussion by News Ltd editors and key journalists earlier this year about the need to do something about the minority Gillard government and its alliance with the Greens. Following that meeting, Murdoch

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### Gillard needs show of control

**Michelle Grattan** Julia Gillard has been cornered by the High Court decision and, foolishly, in her anger and policy anguish, she is turning on the justices. It's a bad look. Never mind that



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tabloids began to campaign in earnest against the government and in particular against its carbon tax.

This power to distort political debate must be challenged and broken and the weakening of Murdoch's grip on his global empire presents a unique opportunity to do so. The question, of course, is whether the government is willing to take what would undoubtedly be an extraordinary and perhaps unacceptable risk to regulate media ownership.

The second problem Murdoch poses for this country is embodied in *The Australian*. Under Chris Mitchell's editorship, the paper has played the role not so much of reporter or interpreter but of national enforcer of those values that lie at the heart of the Murdoch empire: market fundamentalism and the beneficence of American global hegemony.

Unquestioning support for American foreign policy led the paper to conduct an extraordinarily strident campaign in favour of an invasion of Iraq - launched on the basis of false intelligence - which was responsible for perhaps 400,000 deaths, and for which it has never uttered a word of apology.

*The Australian* has conducted a prolonged and intellectually incoherent campaign against action on climate change and undermined the hold in public life of the central values of the Enlightenment, Science and Reason. This has helped make action by any Australian government on the most serious question of contemporary times far more difficult than it ought to have been.

The paper has conducted a series of high-volume and unbalanced campaigns directed against Labor governments, in which its journalists, rather than investigating a problem with an open mind, have often sought out evidence in support of a predetermined editorial conclusion. It has sought systematically to undermine the credibility of its only broadsheet rivals - *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* - and, in a relentless campaign, to intimidate and drive towards the right the only other mainstream source of analysis and opinion in this country, the ABC.

It has conducted a kind of jihad against the Greens, a party supported by 1.5 million of the nation's citizens. By its own admission, it has devoted itself to the task of trying to have that party destroyed at the ballot box, a statement which in itself undermines any claim to fairness or to balance. *The Australian* has turned itself into a player in national politics without there being any means by which its actions can be held to account.

Even though its core value is the magic of the market, it is doubtful *The Australian* could survive without hidden financial subsidy from the global empire of its founding father, Rupert Murdoch, for whom it offers the most important means for influencing politics and commerce in the country of his birth.

There seems to be only one possible solution to the threat to democracy posed by *The Australian*: courageous external and internal criticism. The strange passivity of its two mainstream

Liberal politicians did this on occasion. Labor's habit of invoking Liberal precedents is becoming increasingly a sign of insecurity in its own actions.

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rivals, the Fairfax press and the ABC - even in the face of a constant barrage of criticism and lampooning - has left victims of the paper's attacks vulnerable and friendless. There is an old joke that suggests that no individual ought to engage in battle with those who buy their ink by the barrel. But Fairfax and the ABC have the same arsenal of weapons at their disposal.

In the course of my research I have become aware that considerable unease is felt by journalists at *The Australian* about the political extremism and frequent irrationalism of the paper for which they work.

The paper employs many of the best journalists in the country. It only requires a different editor-in-chief and owner for it to become a truly outstanding newspaper.

**This is an edited extract from Robert Manne's *Quarterly Essay, "Murdoch's Australian and the Shaping of the Nation" (Black Inc), out Monday. Also available as an e-book.***

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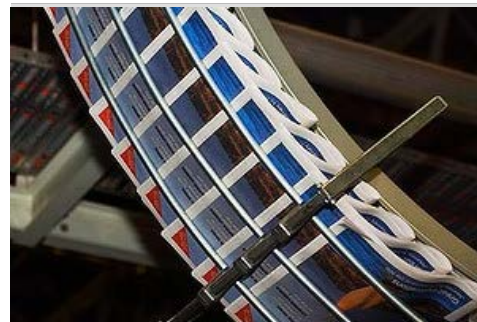
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