Rupert Murdoch and the state of American journalism

21 July 2011, 2.54pm AEST

Rupert Murdoch has yet to file a disclosure statement. One is forthcoming.

Our goal is to ensure the content is not compromised in any way. We therefore ask all authors to disclose any potential conflicts of interest before publication.

LICENCE TO REPUBLISH

We license our articles under Creative Commons — attribution, no derivatives.

Click here to get a copy of this article to republish.

The decline and fall of Rupert Murdoch has more twists and turns than a colonoscopy: the closing of the 168-year-old News of the World; the resignation of two of his top executives and four Scotland Yard officials; the death of the whistle-blower who set the disasters in motion. And this week, the billionaire was hit with a pie plate full of white foam as he testified before a committee of Parliament.

Watching the scandals unfold is currently a spectator sport in the United States. This will change if it turns out that scoop-hungry News Corp reporters hacked the phones of 9/11 victims.

But even if the Murdochs emerge relatively unscathed here, the scandal provides an urgent reminder that Americans need to understand the state (and likely fate) of journalism — and consider the consequences of inaction.

In her 1993 Nobel Prize lecture, author Toni Morrison spoke of "the faux-language of mindless media" that "moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed-out mind."

She was referring, of course, to shorter stories to accommodate shorter attention spans; increased time and space for opinion at the expense of more authoritative, non-partisan sources of information; the celebrification of the news; the cozy relationship between politicians and publishers; and the monopolisation of news outlets.

Murdoch did not invent these ills but his American properties, which include Fox TV, The Wall Street Journal and the tabloid, New York Post have contributed to an environment in which they flourish.
This culture is all the more dangerous because in the twenty-first century most newspapers have folded or are on life support. Although they were never immune from pressure from advertisers, papers used to be relatively independent and well-staffed with reporters who covered “beats” (e.g. city hall, police, education), acquiring in-depth knowledge of the issues.

The rise of online advertising has devastated traditional sources of revenue for newspapers, depopulated newsrooms, and degraded content. My own local paper, the Ithaca Journal, once employed two dozen mid-career beat journalists and editors. Today, it is staffed by three entry-level reporters and two editors.

And the Internet has not filled the void. With a few exceptions, Internet sites don’t break news: they aggregate, disseminate, and pontificate. They’re parasites, still dependent on information gathered by print journalists.

In their book The Death and Life of American Journalism, University of Illinois communications professor Robert McChesney and Robert Nichols, a reporter for The Nation, propose that the U.S. government subsidize daily newspapers in communities with only one newspaper, cut postal rates for periodicals, and provide a tax credit of 50% on the salaries of all newspaper employees.

In the early 19th century, they point out, the federal government granted newspapers discount postage, exemption from taxation and contracts to publish legal notices. The number of newspapers in the U.S. increased tenfold in fifty years. The result was a “raucous democratic discourse” with no loss of editorial independence or official censorship.

Government subsidy may not be practical or politically possible, but the challenge has to be met somehow because the stakes are so high.

Walter Lippman, one of America’s most influential journalists, predicted decades ago that democracy would fail without a “steady supply of trustworthy and relevant news. Incompetence and aimlessness, corruption and disloyalty, panic and ultimate disaster, must come to any people which is denied an assured access to the facts. No one can manage anything on pap. Neither can a people.”

With so much attention focused on the Murdochs’ misdeeds, and the “aimlessness, corruption and disloyalty” of government officials, the time is now to make sure that Americans have access to the news they need.