

Back in the Dark Ages, when I was a teen-ager at the Cincinnati Country Day School, our history teacher, Lee Pattison, assigned us readings from *Time* Magazine every week. This was in addition to regular assignments in our history texts, and as such, it seemed a cruel burden – those *Time* articles took a long time to read! But Mr. Pat believed that current events were important, and that *Time* was the preferred source for most people, and he wanted us to develop a habit.

In that era – the early sixties – *Time's* circulation was just an eyelash under three million, and the magazine, then almost forty years old, was something of a cultural phenomenon. Its cover portraits were widely celebrated. Its “Man of the Year” designation was eagerly awaited. Its often-snarky movie reviews were referenced with glee. And its political coverage, though unabashedly Republican, was considered a “must-read” for both the political class and others who aspired to be well informed by the day’s standard.

Henry Luce, the enigmatic publisher of *Time*, was probably not so well known to the general public as his magazine, along with its sister publications, *Fortune*, *Life* and, somewhat later, *Sports Illustrated*. But he was well-known in publishing and journalistic circles – by the time I went to work for a newspaper, in 1971, more than a few of my colleagues would have gladly surrendered their bylines to work for a “Luce publication.” They were class acts, and the patrician-seeming Luce a near fairy-tale steward. Moreover, Luce’s profile in the political world was high. Presidents, along with lesser-elected mortals, may not have liked him, but they had to pay attention. Almost certainly, this nation’s support for Chiang Kai-Shek, to the exclusion of any recognition for Red China from the end of World War II to Nixon’s policy reversal in 1971, was due to Luce’s relentless lobbying in his magazines.

Rupert Murdoch, a publisher who is arguably better known today than Luce ever was, is a force of a very different color. The purchaser, twelve years ago, of the *Wall Street Journal*, the creator, 23 years ago, of the Fox Network and then *Fox News*, the owner of the *New York Post* and some 800 companies around the world, he is a larger-than-life figure who, at age 87, is still very much involved with his businesses – in 2017 he sold the 20th Century Fox movie studio, which he had purchased in the mid-eighties for \$525 million, to Disney for \$66 billion.

His formula for success with newspapers, the tabloid combination of sex, sports and crime, is by now famous, or infamous, in Sydney, London and New York – winning him the headline, “Thanks for the

Mammaries,” when *The Sun*, his British best-seller, was called out by England’s fortnightly satirical newsmagazine, *Private Eye* for a Page 3 feature that some have called “all the nudes fit to print.” His other hot British property, the weekly *News of the World*, with a circulation of more than two million, earned the scorn of self-respecting journalists everywhere some ten years ago when its reporters began hacking into the telephones and e-mails of highly visible figures in the worlds of British sport, politics, entertainment and ultimately, the Monarchy. They did it with the tacit endorsement of their editors, so great was the competitive pressure to scoop rivals, and only when one of the most formidable of those rivals, *The Guardian*, blew an ineluctably insistent whistle on Murdoch’s people did the whole thing come to trial, and the hacking stop. In 2011, as a result, the *News of the World* went out of business.

For some time, it has seemed to me that it would make an interesting Literary Club inquiry to try to assess which of these two publishers was more influential in his era. Luce, with his magazines and, as we shall see, his outsized ambition for what he called, post-World War II, “the American Century”? Or Murdoch, with his much larger, but more diffuse, media empire? A few caveats: The America of Henry Luce’s era was far smaller, and far more cohesive, than the America of today. Proportionately, it was easier to wield influence then, especially with a set of tools as effective as *Time*, *Fortune* and *Life*. In the current age, with so many televised options reaching fragmented sets of viewers, let alone the Internet and the multiple print products still available, it has to be harder. So my face-off is somewhat contrived. Also, for the most part, I’ll be talking about Murdoch’s influence in the U.S. – not in Great Britain and Australia, where he is an equally strong presence. The irony is, neither man started out to become influential per se. Both wanted to achieve . . . something . . . but in the beginning, possibly not even they could have articulated what.

Luce, the son of American missionaries to China, grew up in Asia, in the sheltered, homogenous world of missionary compounds, where belief in the moral superiority of Christianity and the cultural superiority of Western traditions, and the urgency of bringing both to the untutored Chinese, was gospel. Young Harry, as he was called, absorbed these beliefs from his father, to whom he was always close, and they undoubtedly formed the foundation of his lifelong love for

China. At the same time, he developed a considerable appetite for wealth, power and worldly success, prompted in part by exposures through his advanced schooling at Hotchkiss and Yale. Gifted neither athletically nor socially, he was exceedingly bright, ranking first in his class during much of his tenure in prep school. At Yale, he received both a Phi Beta Kappa key and membership in Skull and Bones, the most sought-after of the university's elite secret societies. He was also appointed managing editor of the *Yale Daily News*, a notable achievement by any measure, but a disappointment to Luce, who had wanted the chairmanship. His interest in journalism as a possible career had taken root early; it reflected his restless intellectual curiosity and, in some indefinable way, that "higher calling" that his father always had answered to. "I am just about coming to that stage," he wrote shortly before leaving Hotchkiss, "when the world of fact and ideas is intensely interesting. And I hope that I may attain one thing: 'to wear life as a mantle.' Until one can do that, I believe no man can really be said to live."

He lost the *News* chairmanship to longtime friend and rival, Britton Hadden, who, incidentally, had also beaten him out for class orator at their Hotchkiss graduation. Talented and driven, the two boys were bound to spar over common goals, like the *News* chairmanship. But ultimately, their rivalry was constructive. A common interest in things literary, and in journalism specifically, subsumed their competitive differences, and no sooner had they graduated from Yale than they were pursuing a project – code named "the paper" – that would result in the birth of Time Magazine.

Rupert Murdoch's upbringing was privileged. The son of a knighted journalist and newspaper publisher, Sir Keith Murdoch, and a debutante mother, young Murdoch was never indulged, but neither was he deprived. Shipped off to boarding school at age ten, he was forced to reckon immediately with two things he hated, sports and authority, the latter in the form of a prickly headmaster who sought to break the pride of rich kids through the leveling challenges of sport. But as one biographer notes: "Rupert, it turns out, is rather unbreakable. The lesson he seems to take from all this is the obvious one: Fuck them all."

At Oxford, Rupert was arch, aggressive, charming, funny and just a little bit rebellious – on his mantel was a bust of Lenin. He didn't care much about his studies, but was interested in buying the undergraduate magazine *Cherwell*. Then, in the fall of 1952, Keith Murdoch died

suddenly, leaving behind the newspaper he owned outright, the *Adelaide News*. It was Rupert's rightful inheritance, and to prepare himself to become publisher, he went immediately to work in Fleet Street, epicenter of Britain's notoriously competitive journalistic practices. On Fleet Street, it was all about single-copy sales: Whatever you had to do to get them, you did it. And whatever training Murdoch might have thought he needed, he figured he had absorbed it within just a few months. So back to Australia he went, and without missing a beat, threw himself into the operations of the *Adelaide News*.

From where did such confidence emerge? Arrogance played a part, but so did an unfathomable, tectonic energy that characterized his actions then, at age 23, and continued to do so for the next sixty-plus years. This is a man, after all, who just three years ago, a week shy of his 85th birthday, married his fourth wife, model Jerry Hall – Mick Jagger's ex. In 1956, shortly after taking over the *Adelaide News*, he bought the Perth-based *Sunday Times*, revamping it in the sensational – sex, sports, crime – style to which he was committed. It was the beginning of a buying spree that goes on into the present day. But I'm getting ahead of myself!

The concept for what would become Time Magazine was born out of Henry Luce and Britton Hadden's dissatisfaction with the then available options for news. Contemporary magazines, with the exception of something called the *Literary Digest*, tended to focus on topics other than current events. The *Digest*, with a circulation well over one million, was – as its name suggested – a compilation of articles from numerous sources, but they were neither tightly edited nor reader-friendly. Newspapers of the day were, in the two Yalies' judgment, both long-winded and leaden. Even the New York Times, which then (as now) was the nation's newspaper of record, was deemed dull, albeit comprehensive. Journalist A.J. Liebling described it as “the colorless, odorless and especially tasteless Times . . . a political hermaphrodite capable of intercourse with conservatives of both parties at the same time.”

Luce and Hadden envisioned something informative, lively, fun and concise. Something that their target upper middle class audience could pick up and absorb within an hour. No article was to be more than 400 words long. Like the *Digest*, it would draw mostly on existing sources (copyright rules in the early '20s were not an issue), but

rewritten to make for a better “read.” And in the beginning, at least, it was also to be “objective “ and “unbiased.” Throughout the ‘20s and ‘30s, it mostly made good on that intention; it rarely took clear or sustained positions. Even so, it was filled with opinions on virtually everything it reported. Thus, “President Harding, in a speech before Congress, placed a constructive program before the people.” In that way, opinion soon became fundamental to the character of the magazine.

Time was launched in March of 1923. Raising the money to back it had been difficult. Luring subscribers was equally so. But little by little, the fledgling magazine caught on, and from a subscription base of 8,000 at the start, it grew to more than 170,000 within four years. Key to this success, much as Luce and Hadden had hoped, was its language: the “Timesese” that gave rise to: endless compound adjectives, inverted sentences and made-up words – as in the verb to “heffle,” meaning to talk loud and long without saying much, derived from Alabama Senator Tom Heflin’s oratorical inadequacies.

The bulk of the credit for *Time*’s style goes to Hadden, whose admiration for Homer’s *Iliad*, inspired him. The bard’s use of such phrases as “wine-dark sea” and “fleet-footed Achilles” seemed to him to infuse the epic poem with the kind of energy he wanted for his magazine. He wanted vivid words: “potent,” not “powerful,” “blatant,” not “obvious.” He wanted words that were invented, or retrieved from obscurity, or borrowed from foreign languages – “tycoon,” “pundit,” “socialite” and “kudos” are some examples that have come into common parlance.

Perhaps inevitably, parodies of “Timesese” were soon ubiquitous, the most famous, I think, being Wolcott Gibbs’ profile of Luce for *The New Yorker*. He wrote the entire piece in a hyperactive version of *Time*’s own style, as in this famous quip: “Backward ran sentences until reeled the mind,” and in this glimpse of a possible future for Luce: “Certainly to be taken with seriousness is Luce at thirty-eight, his fellowman already informed up to his ears, the shadow of his enterprise long across the land, his future plans impossible to contemplate. Where it all will end, knows God!”

In the early part of 1929, Britten Hadden died of complications from strep. Luce, now on his own – and contrary to Wolcott Gibbs’ most clever musings – soon knew exactly where he was going with it. He was going to create a second magazine, one that would be named *Fortune*, and that would be, in the words of biographer Alan Brinkley, a vehicle

“to communicate big ideas, to tackle important questions, and to establish great goals for the world of business and for the nation.” If *Time* had become influential via its style, *Fortune* would be influential via its substance. And that influence would be “blatant,” not “obvious”!

With four major Australian newspapers under his belt, and a growing take-no-prisoners reputation, Rupert Murdoch entered the British market in 1968. He purchased first the already popular weekly, *News of the World*, then followed it a year later with the acquisition of a struggling daily, *The Sun* – which he transformed to a tabloid, reportedly telling his newly appointed editor, Larry Lamb, “I want a tear-away paper with lots of tits in it.” Also critical: brash headlines and sensational stories. The formula worked. *The Sun* began a steady climb to its current circulation of 1.5 million, making it Britain’s largest and, with profit margins of 60 to 70 percent, one of Murdoch’s great cookie jars.

But the money was only part of it. Still not 40, Murdoch was enamored by the power of the press: “I sensed the excitement and the power – not raw power, but the ability to influence at least the agenda of what was going on. If you’re in the media particularly newspapers, you are in the thick of all the interesting things that are going on in a community, and I can’t imagine any other life that one would want to dedicate oneself to.” In this conviction, he has never wavered. By 1979, *The Sun* had become the most popular daily in the UK; together with *News of the World*, they backed Margaret Thatcher all the way to Downing Street. And since that watershed moment, no British government has been elected without the support of Rupert Murdoch.

In the United States, during this same period, he bought two newspapers in San Antonio, founded the tabloid *Star* (as a competitor to *The National Enquirer*), bought the *New York Post*, founded the News Corp. holding company, and bought the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *New York Magazine* and the *Village Voice* – among others too numerous to itemize here. Within his first year as owner of the *Post*, he decided that the paper should prove its mettle by electing somebody, it didn’t really matter whom, just that the *Post* be responsible. After a bit of casting about, he settled on arguably the least likely candidate for mayor (but also the one who needed him most): Ed Koch. Koch was single, possibly gay, somewhat homely and given to whining. No matter. The *Post* became Koch’s champion; his presence, charm and inevitability were its

mantra; its pictures and personal stories about him drowned out any hint of negativity. Koch was elected mayor in 1977, and Murdoch, still something of an *arriviste* in the city, was suddenly a force. As biographer Michael Wolff describes them, the Murdoch precepts for such success are simple:

1. You can't succeed unless you have political influence
2. It's more efficient to get political influence by starting with a new group than with the entrenched group – established power doesn't give people outside the establishment very many opportunities.
3. Likewise, the new people vying for power need you more than the entrenched people with power.
4. Your power and influence put in service to the upstarts will be magnified if the upstarts win.
5. The upstarts always eventually win.
6. In general, while conservatives are better for business, any political faction that owes you something is better than one that doesn't.

To all that I should add one other element of the Murdoch formula: fear. Political figures who fall out of favor may not go gently into the night. In 1992, when the Murdoch contingent lost faith in Conservative John Major, *the Sun's* then editor, Kelvin MacKenzie, claimed to have answered an inquiry from Major about the following day's coverage by telling him: "I've got a large bucket of shit on my desk and tomorrow morning I'm going to pour it all over your head." Examples of Murdoch buying influence in the U.S. are less about newspapers than more straightforward tactics. In the mid-90s, Rupert saw that HarperCollins, his publishing house, gave Newt Gingrich a healthy advance for his memoir. In 2010, News Corp. gave \$1 million to the Republican Governors Association and \$1 million to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Broadly speaking, however, Murdoch's greatest impact in the United States, has been through television.

In 1986, Rupert purchased six independent stations owned by fellow mogul John Kluge, whose company, Metromedia, was a runaway success story. Those stations formed the nucleus of the Fox Network. Eight years later, he added fifteen more, immediately establishing Fox as a network player on a par with ABC, NBC and CBS. Better still, the group

that he added was a programming producer, with one notable hit, *The Wonder Years*. Murdoch's people (he appears to always hire well) took that ball, too, and ran with it, soon producing shows with national appeal like *The Simpsons* and *Married with Children*. In 1996, Murdoch launched the Fox News Cable Network, which, at last count, was the most watched network in cable news for the past 16 years. It beat CNN MSNBC combined in total viewers for prime time and across a 24-hour day.

I think none of us here tonight has any doubt about the potency of Fox News, which, in the October 2018 ratings, was reaching 2.4 million viewers daily. It is the scourge of more liberal – dare I say more balanced? – media; its stars, Sean Hannity, who reaches 3.2 million viewers daily, and Brian Kilmeade are cherished sages by legions of our fellow Americans. But there is more to it than that. I have noted this evening Murdoch's commitment to tabloid journalism – tabloid as he defines it: loud, powerful, sexy, sassy, crass, visceral and vaudevillian in its appeal to anything but our better selves. In Murdoch's experience, in Australia and again in England, this is what works. But in the U.S., it has worked only to a point. He tarted up the *New York Post*, but it hasn't been the home run he seeks. It continues to lose money. He sold the *Star* in 1990. Yet on television, on *Fox News*, the formula does work. Listen, again, to Michael Wolff: "Even with this unprepossessing American experience, Murdoch remains committed to the tabloid model, unable really to see beyond it, believing that the visceral impact of tabloidism has to prevail – and indeed, it finally does, on the Fox network and on Fox News." They are, in effect, tabloids on the air.

With the creation of *Fortune*, Luce sought to elevate the importance of business in the minds of his readers. Said the magazine's prospectus, "Accurately, vividly and concretely to describe Modern Business is the greatest journalistic assignment in history." But more than that, and in a way *Time Magazine* had not, he wanted to establish a voice for himself within the company, to offer big ideas, to address important questions and to establish great goals for the world of business and for the nation.

Increasingly, these ideas were his own. Among them: he did not like Franklin Roosevelt; he felt the president operated "outside the law," and exercised power almost arbitrarily. He felt the New Deal was arrogant and dismissive toward business. At the same time, he was

impatient with what he perceived as the rigidity and conservatism of many corporations and their leaders; he began to argue that the “dangerous path to collectivism” could be averted only by a change in the character of private enterprise.

His solution, promoted in the pages of *Fortune*, was what he called “corporate liberalism,” a newly enlightened pairing of government and business working together, the former to respect the “rule of law” and the prerogatives of business, and the latter to embrace policies of social responsibility, making opportunity available to all. It was, in effect, an admission that some of the New Deal was OK, but an admonition that a lot more of it was not, and it was massaged in a series of “Round Tables” presented in *Fortune* starting in 1939. These reflected the views of various business leaders, carefully selected by the editors – who were clearly doing Luce’s bidding – to chew over a potpourri of critical political issues. A year later, the editors congratulated themselves, “We have the satisfaction of having done a small bit in the herculean job of bringing business and government points of view into alignment.”

I haven’t the time tonight, nor would you have the patience, for me to document fully the ways in which, over the next two and a half decades, Henry Luce tried to influence the course of U.S. politics and policy. The urgency he attached to involving the United States in the European war from 1939 on. His all-out push for the candidacy of Wendell Wilkie in 1940. His ardent support for, and almost willful misreading of others’ support for, Thomas E. Dewey in 1948. And through it all, like a leitmotif of dysfunction, his undying faith in Chiang Kai-shek and his Kuomintang government of nationalist China. Right up until the Red Chinese prevailed in 1948, Luce was in there slugging, with *Time*, with *Fortune* and with his new runaway success, *Life* – which reached a circulation of 1.5 million in its first year alone – running cover stories, writing editorials and mitigating the increasingly negative reports of his correspondents – even the vaunted Theodore H. White – concerning the corruption and malfeasance of Chiang and his followers.

What drove him? What made him so certain not only that he was right, but that he had the right to impose his views on others as he did? Part of it was genuine belief that his readership was capable of understanding serious material and (Murdoch would argue!) was not interested in what Luce called “grue, sex, nonsense and mugs.” Part of it, too, was certainty that he was right in the shots the magazines were calling, and if they proved to be wrong, that he could do a fast about-face

and keep moving. Thus, in the mid-30s, Time could talk cheerily of the Nuremberg rallies as “the greatest show and heartiest picnic on earth,” while admiring Hitler’s “magnetism.” Three years later, when the true face of fascism had become apparent, his magazines’ calls for an end to isolationism and appeasement were shrill.

In 1941, in a February issue of Life, Luce penned an essay entitled “The American Century” in which he called for “a passionate devotion to great American ideals . . . a love of freedom, a feeling for the equality of opportunity, a tradition of self-reliance and independence and also of co-operation.” Although it was not a call to arms per se, it was a ringing endorsement of the urgency he attached to thwarting totalitarianism wherever it might arise. The essay prompted thousands of letters, many pro, some con, but even as outsized as this response was, it did not signal a profound change in contemporary public conversation. What it did signal was symbolic: Says historian Alan Brinkley, “It was a highly visible symbol of a growing movement among American leaders, and eventually among many others, to redefine the nation’s relationship to the world, and in the process, to redefine America’s sense of itself.”

Let me return, briefly, to Rupert Murdoch and his acquisition, in 2007, of the *Wall Street Journal*. It is the one great manifestation of his influence in this country that I haven’t touched upon, and it should not go unexamined. I say that because, not least, since taking ownership he has – in the views of many, if not all – significantly improved the product. The paper now covers national and international news in a way that it never did before. Its weekend edition, filled with soft news, book reviews and commentary, is a five-star offering.

At the time he began his quest, roughly three years before victory, it seemed muddleheaded to many – why would he want to bother? – and quixotic to many more. Although publicly traded, the controlling shares of Dow Jones were held by the Bancroft family – great, great grandchildren of founder Clarence Barron – and their lack of interest in selling was reputedly as rock-solid as the paper’s uncompromisingly right-wing convictions.

The answer to the first -- why bother? – goes to the heart of what Murdoch, and probably a lot of other Masters of the Universe are all about: the desire for respectability. Sex and sensationalism may pay the bills, but it doesn’t get you the most coveted seat at the table. In each of his markets, he has a downscale paper (or two), then couples it with an

upscale paper and a television station. In Australia, he created the *Australian* for the upmarket. In London, in 1981, he bought the venerable *Times* and *Sunday Times*. Neither was particularly sizzling from a sales standpoint, and they still aren't. But they are respected. And he has kept them so. In America, he had the *Post*. And then he had *Fox News*. His upmarket quarry was the *Wall Street Journal*.

But taking on the Bancrofts? Knowing their longstanding intransigence, industry observers were quick to say, "Never gonna happen." In defense of that argument, the three branches of the Bancroft family were probably most united by the very considerable money that their inheritance bequeathed them, and secondarily by the prestige attendant to, in effect, owning the *Wall Street Journal*. But Rupert saw through all that.

A remarkably shrewd student of human nature, and a bemused kibitzer of the various newspaper-owning families around the U.S., he had a strong hunch that greed would topple pride. One hint was some dissension in the sixth generation of Bancroft heirs, visible early on. Another was the heavy breathing he could detect when he offered \$60 a share, after hearing from every reputable analyst, his own and those in the industry, that Dow Jones' stock was worth \$50 per at the outside. The whole story of how he played his cards is a fascinating study in stealth, patience and the slow-but-steady reeling in of a very big fish.

Was it a good deal? Within two years of Murdoch's purchase, News Corp. took a \$3 billion write down – so badly had newspapers, and newspaper stocks, fared in the aftermath of the 2008 financial meltdown. The purchase of the *Journal* was soon tagged as one of the worst financial moves of Murdoch's career. Nonetheless, I've seen no evidence that Murdoch is sorry. On the contrary, he is said to wish he could own the *New York Times* as well.

So who has had more influence in his era? Luce or Murdoch? I think we can make some assumptions.

The first is that the former made, and the latter is still making, significant differences in the political and cultural thinking of this nation. They have done it through their ownership of very prominent media outlets and through their will to disseminate their own thinking through those outlets.

Go back to the end of World War II, and you will find *Life* consistently named the most popular magazine in America, but *Time* the

most important. It was, its editors boasted, “the magazine to which something like half the important people in America are turning for help in understanding the promise and the problems of our time.” Luce went even further: “*Time*,” he once argued, should be “a continuing seminar in how to develop the Good Society in the U.S., because America’s success in that effort, “morally and in every other way, is involved, favorably and unfavorably, with man’s fate everywhere.”

I can’t offer you similar braggadocio from Murdoch; unlike Luce, he has never sought to explain or justify what he does. He simply does it, and lets the results – and the revenues – speak for themselves. But that doesn’t diminish his impact.

A second assumption is that Luce’s publications, misguided though they could be as to various particulars, were always, as I said early on, a class act. They reached a lot of people, but probably – as those *Time* editors noted above – the readership was skewed to a somewhat educated and affluent base. The same might be said of the *Wall Street Journal*. But *Fox News* – and the *NY Post* where it is available – reaches a very broad audience.

Which leads me to my third, and final, assumption, and that is, in the matter of influence, I give the edge to Murdoch. Television is just so powerful. More people watch than read. That’s my conclusion, but I don’t have to like it. That may be why I never watch *Fox News*. And why I still subscribe to *Time*. Thank you.