

Rupert Murdoch and the Mediatisation of Politics

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The mediatisation of politics by the Murdoch media empire has significantly helped to shape outcomes of major events in Australia and across the world. In particular, the transition between Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison in 2018 is an example of mediatisation as a structural intervention in Australian politics. Over time the media logic of News Corp has eroded the Australian political process, allowing for a commercialised agenda to be set, restructuring the political decision process and power balances in Australia. Rawolle (2010, p. 22) asserts that mediatisation rests on the question of understanding intermediaries' impact on the democratic processes. This essay contends that Rupert Murdoch is such an intermediary, powerful enough to reshape whole political systems and oust undesired parties, and will consider the concept of mediatisation and politics through four themes - mediatisation in relation to structural changes, agenda setting, power and media logic - illustrating with examples drawn from Murdoch's relationship to politics.

Rawolle (2010, pp. 23-24), reviewing the concept of mediatisation, links the term to the accretion of power by intermediaries such as media and elites, and their impact on political decision making. Strömbäck (2008) describes a four phase model from mediation to mediatisation, where the third stage sees political actors, even with sophisticated forms of media management (McKnight 2015, p.119), having to adapt themselves to media logic to gain access; governing and policy making processes are sparked by media logic's "notion of newsworthiness". The fourth phase of mediatisation sees political actors internalise these adaptations; media logic and standards of newsworthiness "become a built-in part of the governing processes" (Strömbäck 2008, p. 239). With mediation, media are still seen as political tools and society is 'translated' by the media; with mediatisation there is active adaptation (Johnston & Forde 2017, p. 249), agenda setting (McComb 2011, p.11) and enlarged uptake and dissemination (Agha 2011, p. 163). Johnston and Forde cite Swedish theorist Asp: "political actors have 'adapted to the requirements which the mass media place on their coverage of the political world.' This tendency to adaptation is called 'the mediatization of politics' " (Asp 1986, cited in Johnston & Forde 2017, p. 249). Politics moves from democratic representation and institutionalising collective decisions to a stylised logic of "party grandstanding" (Habermas 1989, p. 207 cited in Johnston & Forde, 2017, p. 250). The role of mainstream media also shifts - from political or democratic institutions with a moral obligation "to assist in making democracy work" to "commercial enterprises with no particular obligation" (Strömbäck 2008, p.234). This shift to media logic is associated with the rise in populism, where politics becomes a "spectacular" performative style, appealing directly to 'the people', and content collapses into style. (Moffat & Tourmey (2014, p. 388).

Rawolle links mediatisation to changing power relations; intermediaries such as journalists, parties and elites don't just gain relative power, but also re-shape power relations (Rawolle 2010, p. 23). Rawolle notes adaptation - "the slow substitution of media logic for party logic in

politics”; media considerations have become more important than political considerations in decision making, to the point that politics has become so dependent on mass media that it has lost its autonomy” (Rawolle 2010, p. 24). Long-term structural change is a key concern in Hjarvard’s consideration of mediatisation. Mediatisation seeks an “understanding of how social institutions and cultural processes have changed character, function, and structure in response to the omnipresence of the media” (Hjarvard 2013, p. 2).

“To see Fox News as an arm of the Trump White House risks missing the larger picture. It may be more accurate to say that the White House — just like the prime ministers’ offices in Britain and Australia — is just one tool among many that this family uses to exert influence over world events.” (Mahler & Rutenberg 2019, p. 6).

The media are no longer just communicative tools or institutions, their presence has become not only “a structural condition for social and cultural practices” (Hjarvard 2013, p.3), but also increasingly autonomous, forcing other institutions to submit to their logic. Instead of focusing on the communication process, mediatisation looks at long-term “structural transformation of relationships between media, culture, and society” (Hjarvard 2013, p. 3).

Moffitt and Tormey (2014) define the concept of political style as “repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations”, referencing Judith Butler’s concept of performativity: “juridical power inevitably “produces” what it claims merely to represent. Populists in speaking of ‘the people’ are attempting to “bring a subject called ‘the people’ into being” (Butler 1990, as cited by Moffitt & Tormey p. 389). The ousting of ‘small L’ liberal Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, immediately led to the institution of populist Scott Morrison (Johnson 2019), appealing through the relatable “daggy dad” characterisation that he and News Corp have constructed (Maley 2020) (Wilson 2020). Globally, News Corp owned papers have favoured the elections of politicians such as Trump, Johnson and Morrison, performing atop ‘relatable’, populist platforms.

Morrison’s sustained ‘us-against-them’ rhetoric with regards to the “quiet Australians” (Murphy & Martin 2019), seeks to create a political wedge constructing a new ‘people’, the ‘quiet Australians’, lauded by Morrison for the LNP’s 2019 federal election win. Performance is a feedback loop, changing the audience’s subjectivity which can change “the content and efficacy of the performance” (Moffat & Tourmey 2014, p. 389); populism and polarisation go hand in hand.

Commercial viability becomes increasingly important to political success (Strömbäck 2008, p. 234). Turnbull’s elitist tone, coupled with a reluctance to reduce complex arguments to a more saleable extractivist commodity-driven approach, could not be reduced to a more radically simplified “terms and terrain of political debate” (Moffat & Tourmey 2014, p. 391) suitable for popularist appeals to outer suburb aspirational voters, catchment for Murdoch’s profitable tabloids. Turnbull’s half-hearted climate policy, the NEG, may have been the last straw.

Murdoch acts in the media landscape to change its structure, reducing safeguards and competition to increase media consolidation (Flew 2013), in Australia helping to diminish rivals such as the ABC (Sinclair 2016, p. 6). Mahler and Rutenberg (2019, p. 7) suggest a dynastic

orientation “centered on empire building in the original sense of the term: territorial conquest”, creating “a monument to decades’ worth of transactional relationships with elected officials”. Murdoch doesn’t even need to ask: “politicians know what Murdoch wants, and they know what he can deliver: the base, their voters — power”.

Murdoch, most of all, is aware of and acknowledges the influences of his newspapers to “set the agenda of political discussion” (Murdoch 1999, p. 39).

Sitting in his living room, Lachlan Murdoch asked his staff “Do you think Malcolm is going to survive?” (Mahler & Rutenberg 2019, p. 60). Days later, News Corporation’s newspaper editors held a session where they planned to get “MT rolled” (Mahler & Rutenberg 2019, pp. 60-61). A news story from Sky about an impending leadership challenge broke soon after, then the Murdoch press pounced, calling Turnbull a “dead man walking” (Burke 2018), setting the agenda for Turnbull’s deposal. Instead of Peter Dutton, Turnbull was replaced by the ostensibly less threatening Morrison. During this time, Sky Australia garnered its greatest ratings in the network’s 26-year history (Wikipedia contributors 2020). Turnbull’s removal is also an example of mediatisation through agenda setting.

Rawolle (2010, p. 23) states that the term mediatisation revolves around two broad theoretical issues, firstly, processes where intermediaries gain relative power (Wahlquist 2020), and secondly how “the involvement of the intermediary changes and shapes power relations” between people within different social fields.

Mahler and Rutenberg explain Murdoch’s opposition to the European Union through his quote: “When I go into Downing Street, they do what I say; when I go to Brussels, they take no notice.” PM John Major said “that in 1997 Murdoch said that he could not support him if he didn’t change his stance toward Europe, which the prime minister took as a demand for an EU referendum” (Mahler & Rutenberg 2019, p. 25). Perhaps this change in power balance is most neatly summed up by David Frum, a former speechwriter for George W Bush: “Republicans originally thought that Fox worked for us. And now we’re discovering we work for Fox” (Mahler & Rutenberg 2019, p.14).

At the fourth stage of mediatisation, media logic can be said to completely colonise politics (Strömbäck 2008, p. 240). Politicians wanting media access “must negotiate with the media’s preferred timing, formats, language” and content (Kreisl et al 2013, p.12). Newsworthiness is all-encompassing, politicians are in a state of permanent campaigning and politics risks losing its grip on governance; “mediated realities replace the notion of a belief in objective realities” (Strömbäck 2008, p. 240). Success on the front page (Archer & Clinton 2017, p. 15) is more important than solving real life.

Sinclair (2016, pp. 4-6) describes *The Australian* as a prestige vehicle to mediate Murdoch’s cultural influence. Editors are selected for their ideological reliability (McKnight 2010, p. 307), or “anticipatory compliance” (McKnight 2012, p. 37). Some, like The Australian’s Chris Mitchell, assume public profiles and run their own campaigns (Sinclair 2016, p. 7). Murdoch has occasional contact but rules by “phone and clone” (Tiffen 2014, p. 142). The Australian “attacks

its critics with a barrage of negative coverage” (Hobbs & Owen 2016 p. 153) exhibiting “distaste, even hatred, for what it terms ‘the Left’, and in particular for the Greens” (Sinclair 2016, p. 4).

Having the power to oust governments and prime ministers certainly changes the structure of societal institutions, including the whole framework of legislation around media competition, allowing for media consolidation, yet another plank in Murdoch’s relentless pursuit of territory in media and political landscapes. Facilitating the transition between Turnbull and Morrison has served to cement a less representative, more populist politics, conforming to media logics that support circulation and consolidate media influence. In terms of power, this transition is a clear example of the process of fourth stage mediatisation, with a vassal party adapted to an agenda that serves Murdoch and clients’ corporate interests.

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