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Murdoch's Pride Is America's Poison

By [BILL KELLER](#)

ROGER AILES is (a) the genius who midwived the astoundingly successful Fox News; (b) the sharpest thorn in the side of Barack Obama; and (c) the most important surviving officer in Rupert Murdoch's global media army.

You can see why he would be a great subject for a biography. He is also (d) a political operator of the first order, which is why there are now three Ailes books in the works, two of which look to me like pre-emptive strikes by Ailes himself.

We'll come back to this little publishing intrigue, but first the news: Murdoch Inc. sinks deeper and deeper into crisis. His newspapers hemorrhage money. The political clout that once justified all that red ink is waning, as exposés of illicit phone-hacking, police payoffs and possible lobbying improprieties make him unwelcome company in any politician's photo op. Murdoch's hopes of expanding his substantial foothold in British broadcasting have been dashed by the scandals. Last Tuesday, a parliamentary committee, voting on party lines, issued a verdict that Murdoch was "[not a fit person](#)" to run a major international corporation. Meanwhile, the acid rain of criminal charges and civil lawsuits continues.

In this beleaguered family of news enterprises, Fox is the good son. It is the most reliable profit center, expected to net a billion dollars this fiscal year. It is untainted so far by the metastasizing scandals. It is a source of political influence more durable than Murdoch's serial romances with British prime ministers. This year the Fox News Primary probably did more to nominate Mitt Romney than New Hampshire or Michigan.

And yet I would argue that — at least for Americans — Fox News is Murdoch's most toxic legacy.

My gripe against Fox is not that it is conservative. The channel's pulpit-pounding pundits, with the exception of the avuncular Mike Huckabee, are too shrill for my taste, but they are not masquerading as impartial newsmen. Nor am I indignant that Fox News is the cultural home of the Republican Party and a nonstop Obama roast. Partisan journalism, while not my thing, has a long tradition. Though I do wonder if the folks at Fox appreciate that this genre is more European than American.

My complaint is that Fox pretends very hard to be something it is not, and in the process contributes to the corrosive cynicism that has polarized our public discourse.

I doubt that people at Fox News really believe their programming is "fair and balanced" — that's just a slogan for the suckers — but they probably are convinced that what they have created is the conservative counterweight to a media elite long marinated in liberal bias. They believe that they are doing exactly what other serious news organizations do; they just do it for an audience that had been left out before Fox came along.

I would never suggest that what is now called "the mainstream media" — the news organizations that most Americans depended on over the past century — achieved a golden mean. We have too often been condescending to those who don't share our secular urban vantage point. We are too easily seduced by access. We can be credulous. (It's also true that we have sometimes been too evenhanded, giving equal time to arguments that fail a simple fact-check.)

But we try to live by a code, a discipline, that tells us to set aside our personal biases, to test not only facts but the way they add up, to seek out the dissenters and let them make their best case, to show our work. We write unsparing articles about public figures of every stripe — even, sometimes, about ourselves. When we screw up — and we do — we are obliged to own up to our mistakes and correct them.

Fox does not live by that code. (Especially the last part. [In a speech](#) at the University of North Carolina last month, Ailes boasted, "In 15 years, we have never taken a story down because we got

it wrong.” Gosh, even the pope only claims to be infallible on special occasions.) For a salient point of reference, compare [Fox’s soft-pedaling](#) of the Murdoch troubles with the far more prominent coverage in The Wall Street Journal, which has managed under Murdoch’s ownership to retain its serious-journalism DNA.

Why does this matter? In the digital era of do-it-yourself news consumption, it is easier than ever to assemble an information diet that simply confirms your prejudices. Traditional news organizations, for all their shortcomings, see it as their mission to provide — and test — the information you need to form intelligent opinions. We aim to challenge lazy assumptions. Fox panders to them.

Which brings me to the story of the dueling Ailes biographies. Ailes, I think, is trying to do with the story of his life what Fox does with the story of the day: control it, spin it for his segmented audience of believers, and demonize anyone who sees things differently.

For a year and a half a journalist named [Gabriel Sherman](#) has been gathering material for a book on Ailes. He writes mostly for New York magazine, the kind of irreverent urban venue from which Ailes would naturally expect no kindness, but Sherman’s work is densely reported and not innuendo-laden or agenda-driven. (He has written a fair amount about The Times, and pulled no punches.) He may be 32, but he’s old-school.

Sherman was informed that Ailes would not talk to him, period. For one thing, the Fox chief was planning to write his own memoir. (He subsequently lined up a Fox News contributor, James Pinkerton, as co-author.) For another, Ailes’s people made clear this was not a book for their audience. When Sherman approached Ailes’s lawyer for an interview, he says, the unsettling response was: “What the hell am I going to talk to you about? I may wind up suing you, for Christ’s sake.”

A few months later Sherman appealed again for an interview, this time for a magazine article on shake-ups at the channel. The Ailes team asked Sherman to agree to one precondition: any negative material in the piece would be attributed to its source by name.

Granted, the casual use of anonymous sources is a plague in journalism. But some stories simply cannot be told unless sources are protected from retribution, and Fox comes down hard on disloyalty. When a producer named Joe Muto was [caught last month](#) slipping in-house videos to Gawker, Fox did not merely, as any employer would, send the mole packing. It called the district attorney to press criminal charges, including grand larceny. Well, at least this answered the nagging question of what, exactly, constitutes a criminal offense in Murdoch World.

Early this year, Sherman learned of a third entry in the Ailes book-a-thon. Zev Chafets was racing to finish an Ailes biography with the cooperation of the subject. Chafets had won favor among conservatives when he wrote a magazine [profile](#) of the radio fire-breather Rush Limbaugh, a profile so evenhanded that Limbaugh subsequently cooperated as Chafets expanded it into a best-selling book.

BY the way, that evenhanded profile was published in The New York Times. And I can easily imagine a similarly fair-minded portrait running on NBC or CNN or NPR. Can anyone imagine Fox airing an unloaded profile of anyone left of center? Say, Nancy Pelosi?

Chafets assured me that while he had been given precious access, he had ceded none of his authorial independence, had not been asked to show the manuscript to Ailes or to forswear anonymous criticism, and was not planning to deliver “a wet kiss.” He described Sherman as “a nice kid.”

But Chafets couldn’t resist mentioning — twice — that Sherman has a fellowship from “a George Soros-funded [institution](#).” Actually, the fellowship in question is from a nonpartisan foundation that gets a minuscule share of its funding (0.5 percent this year) from Soros, the liberal billionaire, and Ailes’s own collaborator, James Pinkerton, was also a fellow at the foundation. But in the Fox mind-set, Soros is a boogeyman, so this is like insinuating that Sherman is on the payroll of the Socialist International.

That’s journalism, Fox-style.