

[Dear Rupert Murdoch \(and Mark Zuckerberg\)](#) [1]

September 19, 2016 [Media Debate](#) [2]
[Journalism](#) [3]
[Open Letters](#) [4]

Open Letter by Jeremiah Horrigan

Sympathy for the Devil—with a Face



My Dear Mr. Murdoch:

Allow me to introduce myself. I'm a former employee of yours who once believed you were to newspapering what the Big Bad Wolf was to Red Riding Hood. I said that many times to anyone who'd listen, though never to your face, since you never showed it around the office. You wouldn't even answer my phone calls.

I made those fruitless calls almost ten years ago, when you were wooing the major stockholders of Dow Jones & Company, whose flagship property, the venerable *Wall Street Journal*, you lusted after. I was a reporter for one of the small dailies that comprised the Ottaway Newspaper chain that Dow Jones also owned.

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I never really expected you to answer my queries about the sale, which was something none of us in the newsroom of the *Times Herald-Record* in Middletown, New York, wanted to happen. We were a feisty little daily with a liberal editorial reputation and a newsroom tradition that valued strong reporting and good writing. We couldn't fathom how we'd possibly fit into your worldwide empire of trashy, soft-core journoporn, let alone your well-known propensity for essentially dictating through those diseased organs what news was fit to print.

To be fair, I have to say that not everyone in the newsroom likened you to the Big Bad Wolf. "The Prince of Darkness" was the more common epithet of choice.

We didn't shy from covering the *Wall Street Journal* story. I was given the task of calling your flacks for comment whenever something was up. The closest I ever got to getting anything more than a "no comment" was a between-us-guys quote from one of those flacks, delivered in the thickest Australian dialect, telling me that "Say what you will about Rupert Murdoch, mite—but 'e's a real *newspaperman*."

This was meant to reassure me, I suppose, and if it didn't do so at the time, that comment has taken on a new, unexpected meaning for me since.

The only man who *did* return my phone calls during your charm offensive of the company's shareholders was James Ottaway, Jr., the scion of the Ottaway family and the largest owner of Dow Jones stock. Like the reporter he once was, Ottaway was appalled by your crimes against journalism. He argued loudly, publicly, and sometimes rather rudely against you and your proposed purchase.

Ottaway's argument was essentially the same as that of another former reporter named David Simon, who testified on the fate of newspapers before Congress two years later in 2009. Simon left his newspaper-of-origin, the *Baltimore Sun*, in 1995, well before the Internet did its damage, but not before what might be called "family values" began to fade from the industry. In his wide-ranging and insightful testimony, the creator of *The Wire* pointed out:

When locally based, family-owned newspapers like the *Sun* were consolidated into publicly owned newspaper chains, an essential dynamic, an essential trust between journalism and the communities served by that journalism, was betrayed.

Ottaway was saying this in 2007. Unfortunately, he was unable to convince Dow Jones's other major shareholders to reject your blandishments. Five billion dollars turned out to be too sweet to resist. The sale went through, and your new employees in sleepy Middletown were left in a sweat of knuckle-biting apprehension about your arrival among what you once called "those silly little Ottaway papers."

Ironically, very little changed at the newsroom when News Corp. took over. Oh, the ethical gymnastics you and your top minions performed during the phone-hacking scandal at the *British News of the World* were now especially delicious. We giggled at the expensive, glossy manuals your remaining minions issued emphasizing ethical behavior in the wake of that mess. But, for the most part, you left us alone. Instead of personal or corporate interference, we were the beneficiaries of benign neglect.

So, I was wrong—or at least short-sighted—in my assessment of the immediate outcome. Our newspapering world did not end with the paper's passage into your hands. I look back on those days in your employ not with fondness, but with rueful dismay. As time has shown, and as I've learned the hard way, you weren't the worst thing to happen to me, to the *Times Herald-Record*, or to the beleaguered profession that I left, most happily, last year.

Pardon me, Mr. Murdoch, for providing you—in traditional, explanatory news-feature style—with a bit more background about a story I'm sure you don't remember, if you ever paid any attention to it in the first place.

Simon's congressional testimony was intended to kill the canard that the Internet was killing the newspaper industry. The killing had been going on for years, at the hands of press lords like yourself. You guys had been cutting back on

local coverage years before the Internet became a player, despite enjoying Scrooge McDuck-level profits and market shares rivaling OPEC's.

Simon fingered a variety of villains, including news aggregators like the *Huffington Post*. He mentioned, almost in passing, a new phenomenon called Facebook. You don't hear much about news aggregators anymore; they're part of the social media landscape. But Facebook? Now that's a hobbyhorse of a different color. Facebook has become the aggregator of everything known and unknown to humankind.



And this is why I can finally feel a bit—just a bit—melancholy when I see your wrinkly face on my news feed. Facebook is the new you, Mr. Murdoch. And it has no face.

No, no, don't tell me about your fellow billionaire Mark Zuckerberg. He's not the face of Facebook the way you're the face of News Corp. Zuckerberg is the quintessence of facelessness. He's got no swash. No buckle. No weird accent screaming across continents, looking desperately for attention and corporate tax breaks. He's never going to marry a Mick Jagger castoff, never going to hold an opinion spicier than a kale salad. He gives every appearance of being a nice guy. Which means he's never been a *newspaperman*, mite. Which also means he's not and can never be a press lord. Not even a press baron. He has no presses, for God's sake. He's amiable, personality-free, the kind of guy who'd take your phone call.

That's what makes him so scary. He and a few other faceless friends of his are busy every day taking over the world, and you with your billions and I with my pension can't do a thing to stop it.

I thought, for a moment there, that rubber-faced news despots were making a comeback this summer when your favorite, Roger Ailes, was accused of sexual extortion by a phalanx of female Fox News employees. Alas. You bought him out for \$40 million, and he disappeared into the bowels of Castle Trump. It's still possible we'll see him in a perp walk. But until then, Ailes has lost his public standing as your most nauseating familiar.

Instead, remember the hoo-hah last spring when some conservative groups accused Facebook of editorial bias? I bet you do, especially now that you've taken the helm at Fox News as interim chief. Glenn Beck, Breitbart News, and others wailed that Facebook ignored conservative opinion in determining its read-by-billions Trending Topics section. Facebook at first denied the charge, then surprised everyone by revealing that stories were selected for the trending section not by a string of bloodless algorithms, but by a gaggle of (unnamed) journalists working from company-issued "guidelines" about what news sources to favor.

This, of course, didn't calm the shattered nerves of the complaining conservatives, whose allegations of liberal bias predate Gutenberg. But for once, I found myself agreeing with the complainants.

By summer's end, the story took another strange turn. Zuckerberg sacked his faceless editors without warning, apparently confident that algorithms could do the work of a basement full of suddenly unemployed journalists. The results were hilarious. The new and improved Trending Topics section included a phony story about Fox's own Megyn Kelly, a profane piece about goose-necked wingnut Ann Coulter, and links to a video of a man doing something...unprintable to a McChicken sandwich.

Speaking of unprintable: In early September, Facebook sank even lower into its own mire by removing a Pulitzer-Prize-winning AP photo from a Norwegian author's feed. It's the famous image of children running from a napalm attack during the Vietnam War, but because the girl in the middle is naked, it triggered an algorithm that flags pornography. In censoring what was arguably the most indelible image of that miserable war, the world took angry notice. The photo was soon back up on Facebook. But despite the company's continuing claims that it's *not* a media enterprise, editor Espen Egil Hansen of Norway's *Aftenposten* shot back, "Mark Zuckerberg is the most powerful editor in chief in the world."

Algorithms, as it turns out, are a lot like you and me; imperfect, driven by what's popular rather than what matters, partial, or impartial in the wrong ways. Any computer scientist will tell you that because they're created by human beings, algorithms have their own biases, which—and this should come as no shock to anyone—include a taste for the salacious and untrue.

I know, I know. "Salacious and untrue" sounds like a winning combination to you, Mr. Murdoch. But that's not my point. I don't know if the urge toward reportorial effort still survives in your presumptive heart, but I wonder if you feel, as I do, at the mercy of these mysterious constructs and the anonymous human drones who have set them loose in the billions of personal newsrooms Facebook has made possible.

News judgment, or the lack thereof, needs a face, and that face used to be yours. You were the source of so much that was wrong with contemporary journalism. But when you gave the world Fox News, for example, at least I knew who my enemy was. I could see you coming a mile away. I could refuse to watch your clown shows, refuse to vote for your clown candidates, turn my back on your clownish editorials.

Now, your grinning visage has been replaced not by one of your squabbling scions or by scheming henchmen, but by an anonymous cabal of Silicon Valley techno-twerps. Their mathematical creations call the shots without our even knowing them. Facebook and its online clones are everywhere and nowhere, and therefore unaccountable.

Hell, even Big Brother had a name and a face. I recognized him in you, Mr. Murdoch, and I never thought I'd see the day when I'd prefer your mug, mite, to whomever and whatever is now running the show.

Yours in utter dismay,

Jeremiah Horrigan

Publishing Information

Dear Rupert Murdoch (and Mark Zuckerberg)

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- "[Ex-Dow Jones Executives Oppose Murdoch's Bid](#) [5]" by Matthew Karnitschnig and Sarah Ellison, *Wall Street Journal*, May 7, 2007.
- "[Ottaway Anticipates Dow Sale Rejection](#) [6]" by Jeremiah Horrigan, *Times Herald-Record*, July 25, 2007.
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Jeremiah Horrigan is a contributing writer at *Talking Writing*, a now-retired prizewinning newspaper reporter, and author of *Fortunate Son: A Father, a Son, and the War on the Home Front*. His work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Salon*, and *Narratively*.

His essays on politics, journalism, and growing up in troubled times can be found at the [Huffington Post](#) [16].

As a follow-up to what happened to his old paper, Jeremiah adds:

We didn't know how good we had it until Murdoch sold us down the river of no return to a vortex of vulture capitalists a couple of years ago. But the sad story of that ornithological debacle will have to wait for another time.

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