

## Campaign Strategy Newsletter 70 July 2011

### Campaign Lessons From the Murdochs

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#### Campaign Lessons From Murdoch: If in doubt, Lop Off A (small) Limb

On Thursday 7 July campaigners and communications professionals everywhere were treated to a case study in crisis management by the Murdoch media empire. News International, run by the Murdoch family, sacrificed its best-selling British Sunday newspaper, the *News of the World*, to try and staunch the loss of influence, reputation and opportunity caused by a journalistic phone-hacking scandal enveloping the title.

If you are not Australian [1] (like Rupert Murdoch) or British (like the newspaper) this drama may not have penetrated your daily consciousness – for a relatively objective appraisal of the “issue” and the story have a look at America’s CNN [2].

Suffice it to say that Rupert (father) and James (son) Murdoch are trying to gain majority control of BSkyB (a major commercial UK broadcaster), that Rupert Murdoch is the world’s leading media magnate, and it turns out that his journalists have been hacking mobile phones to create stories that intrude and exploit the lives of people ranging from UK royalty, to government politicians, to (more importantly), victims of tragedies (murders, war deaths etc) which the News of the World ostensibly championed, while paying all sorts of bribes, and lying to Parliament.

This story has real “you couldn’t make it up” content – the current British government for example seems ‘minded’ to give Murdoch permission to buy a controlling stake in BSkyB while at the same time feeling compelled, like almost the entire media and political establishment not owned by Murdoch (which includes *The Sun* and *The Times*), to condemn its journalistic ethics. And the British Prime Minister had appointed Andy Coulson, editor of the News of the World at the time of much of the hacking, as his chief of media. And that is just for starters. But enough of all that.

When I talk to people about how to campaign or do public communications, I have a little list of simple to-do’s [3] which goes like this:

- KISS (Keep it simple stupid)
- Be visual
- Create events
- Tell stories with real people
- Be proactive - don’t just respond
- Start from where your audience is

After months of brewing scandal, on 7 July News International (NI) pushed the button on ‘being proactive’ in spectacular fashion. It had stone-walled for a long time, while simultaneously sending

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out 'aligning' signals that they were unhappy at what horrors had been discovered in their own camp, and they could easily have sacrificed various journalists, even the one-time *News of the World* Editor and now NI Chief Executive, Rebekah Brooks (formerly Rebekah Wade) but instead it has closed the newspaper.

Newspapers turned to academics to explain the significance – some declared themselves “gobsmacked” (British for ‘very surprised’), while others pointed out that it would be relatively easy for the Murdoch press to re-create a News of the World under another name, for example a Sunday version of The Sun. I’m writing this within hours of the announcement and have no idea which way it will go but it was clearly worth a try for several reasons:

- Murdoch retained sight of his strategic objectives – better to sacrifice one newspaper (of marginal financial importance but seemingly dramatic) than to see the political capital for acquiring BSkyB bleed away (as TV is where the big money comes from)
- It might lead opponents to prematurely declare victory before they did much real financial damage to the Murdoch empire – Tom Watson, a Labour MP heavily involved in the campaign to expose malpractice at News International told Sky news: "This is a victory for decent people up and down the land, and I say good riddance to the News of the World". That could deflate the opposition
- It 'made the weather' and seized the initiative – 'nobody' had been calling for the newspaper to be closed, now the forces arrayed against them might lose focus
- By seeming to punish themselves and locate the “rot” in one place which had been cut out (James Murdoch spoke of a newsroom that had gone bad – the single rotten apple metaphor), NI might hope to head off further demands for punitive action

On the other hand, by unexpectedly sacrificing the newspaper, NI focussed attention on why the ageing media mogul Rupert had not gotten rid of Rebekah Brooks – as one newspaper wrote: ‘The pair had been close for many years: Murdoch is said to treat Brooks like a daughter’. From a damage limitation perspective, getting shot of both of them at once – her and the News of the World, might have been more effective and definitive but to lose ‘a daughter’? Maybe Murdoch couldn’t bring himself to do it. At any event, by not sacking Brooks or getting her to resign, if she now does go, it is less likely to end the questions and calls for the Murdoch empire to be reigned in.

In the days before the surprise announcement, big name advertisers had started to desert News of the World, anxious to avoid contamination of their brands by association. It became more useful as a lightning rod than a profit centre. But the real damage to NI and Murdoch was more basic and more emotional.

It had betrayed its readers – not just News of the World readers but those of The Sun, Britain’s biggest selling newspaper, formerly edited by Brooks, and many more. As the Sydney Morning Herald wrote with an unerring cultural eye, albeit from the other side of the world, “the death blow for the News of the World came on Thursday when veterans' charity the Royal British Legion dropped its campaign partnership with the paper over claims in the Daily Telegraph that an investigator hired by the tabloid may have accessed the voicemails of relatives of dead soldiers”.

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The Royal British Legion is the organisation which honours those who suffer or die in the service of their country in times of war (<http://www.britishlegion.org.uk/>).

*The Sun* is a newspaper which appeals most strongly, in terms of Maslowian values, to the Golden Dreamers and Brave New Worlds [4]. These are people who, as CDSM's surveys show, are on the cusp between the worlds of Settler and Prospector, who agree about the importance of having power over others, of being visibly successful and having visible achievements, and on discipline and national security.

Britain's equivalent, in other words, of one wing of the Tea Party. They feel a visceral empathy with the idealised young soldier putting his life on the line in Afghanistan, and those troops and their families now count amongst the victims of NI's phone hacking tricks. An offence against 'their own': treason.

That breaks the rule "Start from where your audience is". On the one hand, inside the newsroom, the get-ahead, bend the rules orientation of people with these values (Golden Dreamers) might allow you to hack the phone of a celebrity or politician to make it a "better story", but to do so to a family fearing their daughter is murdered, offends against Settler decency and family orientation, and to do so in the case of a dead soldier to get the tearful messages of a relative, is betrayal. The potent force of identity, the need to belong and protect "us" (Brave New World) requires total loyalty. And NI has stuck its foot in the door, right between the two. A potentially fatal values error..

Fatal that is, if the readers notice, and if, they get organised, neither of which may happen. So NI may yet emerge from this disaster without it becoming a catastrophe for the company. The people I would be most worried about if I were working for News International in Britain are not the venerable Royal British Legion but the newer charity 'Help for Heroes' ([www.helpforheroes.org.uk](http://www.helpforheroes.org.uk)) – the new voice of public compassion for honourable, faithful soldiers, sailors and airmen and women. *The Sun* helped raise £7m for that charity – if it now turned against NI, it would be in real trouble.

Any campaigner or PR person needs to analyse their allies and opponents, active and passive, and in this case, NI has gradually alienated its supporters, leaving it effectively friendless. Even ultra-libertarian advocates of 'free speech' and freedom of the press (justifying intrusion) have become half-hearted. When all your allies cease fighting for you, then even weak enemies may be able to do real damage. Seeing a change in the balance of forces, British politicians seem to be revisiting their assumption that to get into power and stay in power, they must kow tow to NI. Tony Blair cultivated Murdoch and David Cameron sees Rebekah Brooks socially but the new Labour leader Ed Milliband has been campaigning for her to be fired.

The danger for NI globally is if the contagion spreads, and their brand becomes something to be avoided by politicians, rather than cultivated. In that sense power and reputation are inextricably linked, so long as politicians pay attention to 'public opinion', and politicians retain some control over who gets a licence to own and run media operations.

#### **The Different Rules Of Close Up And Far Away Campaigning**

What do the Murdoch scandal and the issue of 'climate change' have in common? One thing is that they both illustrate what you could call the difference between close-up and far-away campaigning. It is a difference that applies to campaigning on any subject.

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This is to do with how simple or complicated a thing appears to be. That has to do with distance, both physical and psychological (social, experiential). It works whenever we have to perceive, and then to act, and this applies with a campaign, or any occasion (such as in a social conversation prompted by seeing something 'on the news') which prompts us to make a judgement. Of course advertising tries to do this too.

Imagine you see an object from a great distance. Is it a person or a thing? Not relevant maybe, so you don't have to decide but if you were a soldier on a battlefield, it might be very relevant. A lot might depend on that decision. So you need to decide based on very limited information, and you use short-cuts or 'heuristics' or 'rules of thumb'. Does it move like a person, does it 'behave' like one for example?

Here the first question is a binary choice – person or not a person. If we didn't have to decide and act there and then, we might wait until it got closer. Now the soldier might think, is it on our side or theirs? This is where uniforms come in handy – a brand.

Or, forget the military analogy, we might now see if it's an adult or a child, a man or a woman. If we now had to make a decision, our decision might have to be based on that limited information: woman, do-this; man do-that; child, do-the-other ... etc

If the person gets really close we might see if we recognize them – if it is now someone we know, our decisions probably start to get much more fine-tuned. We know about the person. We have a complex of emotional cues and information to use in deciding what to do next. Our views and reactions can become graduated, qualified, dependent on interactions. It's no longer a binary either or thing but a matter of degree: 'it all depends' ....

The same thing happens with any choice. The less we know about a subject, the simpler it looks. The more we know, whether through 'information' or by experience, the more complicated we know it is. The 'further away' we are, the simpler it is, the 'closer' we are, the more complex it is.

This is important to campaigns because most if not all campaigners are close to their 'issue'. There are audiences who are also close to it: your 'policy community' for instance. In the case of climate change these are the energy policy folk, the transport boffins, the IPCC and science correspondents, the committed activists who read through your websites, and, within limits, the people working in the relevant industries, such as renewables or fossil fuels.

In the case of the Murdoch scandal, there are equivalent communities who have for a long time followed the twists and turns of media ownership, of journalistic behaviour (*The Guardian* newspaper for example has pursued the 'issue' of the phone hacking for months so *Guardian* readers may be much better informed than most), who understand the rules regulating broadcast ownership, monopolies or the law around privacy, the operation of the Press Complaints Commission and so on.

With these audiences you can be fine-tuned, and qualify your views or demands or reactions. Indeed, they expect you to be precise, in proportion to how close they are to 'the issue'. And the closer you get the more specialist and techy and complicated things get.

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Yet many important decisions do not get made this way. Most big decisions require a lot of 'far away' decision making by people who are not 'close to' the subject.

Campaigns mainly exist because people think the right decisions are not being made by people most involved with a subject. So they attempt to 'reach out' and 'engage' others, to 'mobilise' the 'public' or 'public opinion' for example.

In the case of something like the Murdoch scandal which as I write is dominating every media channel, at least in my country, 'the public' is also hearing about it, and may be drawing conclusions. In the case of climate change it bumps along as a background thing we've 'heard about' and every so often it too gets elevated to something we are hearing a lot about (eg around the 2010 Copenhagen event).

In such circumstances you are very affected by the channels of perception, such as the media. The news media in particular, works on the dictum "first simplify, then exaggerate", because the biggest dialectic, the most dramatic polarity, produces the 'best story'. So if you put something grey into it, the 'washing machine' effect of the news media means something black and white will come out the other end. That's what happens if you put 'close up' stuff into the news media, which is a machine designed for harvesting a lot of 'far away' material and simplifying it.

Word of mouth and social networks have a similar effect: it is a zero sum game because the amount of attention we have to give is limited: the competition for 'mindspace'. The only way you can change this to a close-up context is to find ways to involve people in longer, more complex interactions, and preferably, experiences.

So out there in far-away land, things have to be either/or, for that's how they will get processed. Murdoch has either done enough by dropping News of the World, or he hasn't. Which is why keeping or firing Rebekah Brooks can be 'next', whereas the ins and outs of media regulation can't be, unless someone creates a simple choice and manages to focus enough attention on it.

In the case of climate change, campaigners and change advocates (eg many scientists) keep muddling up close-to communication with far-away opportunities. In so doing they all too often cue or trigger the very result they don't want. When for example, a company or organisation announces it has cut carbon 10% in a year, they find it hard not to say "good but ..." or "but it's not enough to ...". Out there in far-away-land where 'normal' people aren't following the details of change, this translates to the negative: change is not happening, climate campaigners are failing, 'people' aren't taking action, the problem is not being solved. 'Not enough' is tested as 'is/isn't'. Helpful triggers like emulation and norming then don't get activated and the dominant frame of this being 'a problem too complicated to solve', 'too painful to contemplate', is reinforced.

There are of course ways around this but not by 'explaining the issue' or 'informing the public' through news.

#### **Change of Context: the Nature End Game**

Here's a case where NGOs and campaigners need to 'educate the public', to 'inform the public'. Last year, Craig Bennett at Friends of the Earth (FoE, EWNI) asked me to look at potential future campaigns on biodiversity. FoE had been looking at 'drivers' of loss of biodiversity, things such as

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deforestation and the economic and trade drivers behind that, or nitrogen pollution, climate change etc etc.. There is a large literature on those but there is another factor not usually considered a 'driver of biodiversity loss', and that is perception, or rather the increasing 'blindness' to biodiversity, the progressive loss of the ability to discern whether or not 'biodiversity' exists.

It is an irony that while across many societies, and certainly here in the UK, many people have become "greener" and more "environmentally aware", this has centred on what CDSM measure as 'ozone friendly' – the acceptance that there is a global environmental crisis – while at the same time, lives and experiences have become progressively divorced from nature, so that each succeeding generation is less equipped to tell whether biodiversity is present or absent, increasing or declining.

People cannot emotionally engage with something they can't see or connect with. They can feel no sense of loss or anger at it, if they cannot identify it. This means that while many people will 'agree' that biodiversity is a 'good thing', they mostly cannot be 'mobilised' to defend it or make specific demands to do so.

The drivers of this growing 'ecological illiteracy' or 'nature blindness' are largely experiential. People's lives have grown more remote from nature: time spent in cars for example, rather than walking. And, as agricultural intensification and even chemicalisation of gardening has progressed, so in a developed country like the UK, nature has retreated and dwindled in extent and abundance. The British government set up a system of protected SSSIs or Sites of Special Scientific Interest in the late 1940s. It was intended as a scientific sample, a laboratory of biodiversity. What was not anticipated was that in many areas those would end up as pretty much the only significant islands of 'nature' that would be left. Readers in Africa, Asia or Latin America beware – the way things are going, much the same will happen everywhere.

Over the same period, nature conservation NGOs such as Wildlife Trusts were founded and grew and created their own sets of nature reserves: a biodiversity estate. Their members can immerse themselves in a biodiverse experience but they are satisficing: by electing to travel (most often drive) to these pockets of nature, their experience is not representative of the countryside as a whole. It is much the same as that of a BBC TV wildlife programme viewer who immerses him or herself in the nature of a rainforest (what the BBC calls the 'escapist bubble') filmed in a reserve, while the rest of the rainforest is converted to cattle ranching, soya or palm oil plantations.

So the context for nature conservation groups and government agencies has changed radically from the time when their founding assumptions and strategies were made. Put at its crudest, society as a whole approves of what they do but has little idea of what it is. When in Britain, conservation groups call for action to protect once common plants like a cowslip, or 'ancient grassland', they are talking about things that most people could not recognize or have no experience of. This means they have very little political base outside their paying supporters, and if for example, the government cuts the state agency (Natural England) for conservation (which it has), then there is likely to be very little public reaction (there was not). We are in the end game for nature, and cannot assume that it is part of normal experience.

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#### **Rebuilding Connection**

Consequently, before such groups can mount effective campaigns, they need to start rebuilding some public understanding of, and connection to 'biodiversity', or nature. They need to take proactive measures to restore the ability to discern quality nature in the fabric of the countryside, suburbs or towns. This problem has crept up on us – when I was at school the erosion of nature was well underway but we had things like “nature tables”. Natural History is not taught in British schools and teachers are reluctant to even try – because they too tend to have no idea even what the trees are that are growing in the school grounds.

Campaigner Tony Juniper has suggested that Britain needs to introduce a Natural History GCSE (a type of qualification taken by teenagers) and I agree but it needs to start earlier than that. Children need to be introduced to nature at a very young age.

Then we need remedial education for adults. Some may take to overt educational offers such as 'Eco-literacy Courses' but for most, it will need to be made more fun, more of a lifestyle choice. To do that, NGOs and others probably need to engage brands and commercial channels, to make seeing and understanding biodiversity into something socially aspirational, in the way that it's seen as desirable to be a bit of an expert on wines, or to be able to tell the difference between mock and real Tudor or Georgian architecture. To do that you need adult lifestyle channels and contexts, in the way that in 1980s Britain, supermarkets and newspapers set up Wine Clubs and educated a market into existence, making Brits realise there were more types of wine than just white, pink and red.

Lastly they need to attach value to biodiversity, in terms for example of material wealth, beauty appreciation, and visible success. By having grading systems for the level of vernacular biodiversity around homes, gardens, villages for example, which get linked to property values.

#### **HFF – An example of A Narrow Proposition**

One reason I've not produced this Newsletter for some months is that I've been working on a project to do with reform of the EU Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), which I hope to write about next time. A different project though, also aimed at the CFP reform process, illustrates the importance of campaigning on a narrow front, and that is Hugh's Fish Fight (HFF).

This TV programme, made by Keo Films, features a 'celebrity chef', the very English Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall. With some behind the scenes help from NGOs and others, HFF is the only external factor which has left a clear mark on business as usual within the dysfunctional, Byzantine process which is European fisheries policy reform. (Despite abundant evidence that it is a social, economic and environmental disaster, not just in Europe but with effects that reach well beyond, it looks as if EU politicians lack the collective will to significantly change it).

EU Fisheries Commissioner, Maria Damanaki (from Greece) is doing her best to reform the CFP, and has seized upon HFF as an example of articulated public concern – and one, crucially, where fishermen and the environmentally concerned public agree. That's because it focuses on one subject and one subject only, namely 'discards'. This is the practice of throwing fish back into the sea if according to EU rules (for a variety of reasons), they should not have been caught. Almost all of

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these fish are of course, by that time dead. Have a look at HFF and join the campaign at <http://www.fishfight.net/>.

Although HFF started life solely in the UK, Damanaki has ensured that it reached a wider political audience by embracing the campaign herself some months ago, and a range of EU states have now declared their support for an end to discarding.

In contrast, the main campaigns run by NGOs are trying to deal with huge rafts of issues, and create long complicated wish lists which are all close-up recipes that don't work with 'far-away' audiences. Paradoxically, one of the main threats to HFF's objectives is probably criticism from environmentalists on grounds that it is not perfect, or could have unintended consequences – both of course are true but saying so would not be sensible.

A campaign design process lesson from HFF is that it was the discipline of film making – having to create a simple, consistent story with high interest and limited content – which enabled Will Anderson and his colleagues at Keo Films to create the basis of what became a good campaign. The limitations of the 'tool', in this case a TV programme, made it easier to focus. In contrast it is very hard to turn an alliance such as Ocean 2012 into a campaign (see eg <http://ocean2012.eu/>). Their main achievement, which more could yet be made of, is to show that the context has changed, so that some fishing interests (especially smaller scale fishers) are now onside with green groups. Although as yet they find it hard to agree on specifics, it is of some political significance that they now at least want to agree.

#### **Greenpeace's parody of the Volkswagen Starwars ad campaign**

Greenpeace has produced a video to encourage Volkswagen to support important laws on CO2 emissions. Watch the video here:

<http://links.mkt1875.com/ctt?kn=3&ms=MzY3OTc4MDUS1&r=MzYzNzA3NzA0MAS2&b=0&j=MTA1Nzg3OTQ5S0&mt=1&rt=0>

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[2] <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/europe/07/07/uk.phonehacking/index.html>, and links

[3] For expansion and details see How To Win Campaigns: Communications for Change, Chris Rose, pub Earthscan, 2010 (2nd edn)

[4] See pages 69 – 91 in How To Win Campaigns: Communications for Change, Chris Rose, pub Earthscan, 2010 (2nd edn) and Using Values Modes at [www.campaignstrategy.org](http://www.campaignstrategy.org) and in the case of Golden Dreamers, [http://www.campaignstrategy.org/articles/VBCOP\\_unifying\\_strategy\\_model.pdf](http://www.campaignstrategy.org/articles/VBCOP_unifying_strategy_model.pdf)

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To offer contributions or comments contact the author [chris.rose@campaignstrategy.org](mailto:chris.rose@campaignstrategy.org)

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