

# Political economy and discourse in Murdoch's flagship newspaper, *The Australian*

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## Abstract

*The Australian* is News Corporation's flagship newspaper in Australia. The only truly national, general daily, *The Australian* demands that it be taken seriously, not only as a 'newspaper of record', but as an actor in the business, politics and culture of the nation. Established by Rupert Murdoch in 1964, *The Australian* is widely understood to be his vehicle of influence, but more than that, it may serve as a case study of how his proprietorial influence is mediated in practice. The political economy of *The Australian* is striking in that it is not a profitable operation, and although it serves to cross-promote other interests of News Corp Australia, the paper appears to exist principally for the purpose of exerting its overt ideological agenda. An implicit assumption in the political economy literature is that ownership entails control, but there are rare opportunities to examine just how this is mediated. However, the chance to research this issue came at the end of 2015, with the retirement of Chris Mitchell, the longest-serving editor-in-chief of *The Australian*, and the subsequent publication of his memoir in 2016. The present study shows that in addition to the predictable neoliberal agenda of the Murdoch-owned media evident in the US and UK, *The Australian* under Mitchell's direction pursued campaigns of its own. Although these were not in conflict with the international agenda, they had peculiar inflections that suggest the editor-in-chief has had "relative autonomy" to assert control and influence in his own right. The complex mediation of proprietorial control considered here has implications beyond the particular case of *The Australian*.

*The Australian* is News Corp's flagship newspaper in Australia. The only truly national, general daily, established by Rupert Murdoch in 1964, *The Australian* demands that it be taken seriously, not only as a 'newspaper of record', but as an actor and agenda-setter involved in the business, politics and culture of the nation. So in spite of a modest daily readership of 300,000 or so in a nation of 24 million (Roy Morgan, 2016), it attracts disproportionate attention within the public sphere: even those who "loathe" it "understand that they cannot afford to ignore it" (Manne, 2011: 5).

The political economy of *The Australian* is striking, in that it is not a profitable operation. Even Murdoch and his apologists concede that it was unprofitable for the first twenty years before making AUD300 million between 1985 and 2007. After the Global Financial Crisis, *The Australian* is said to have lost AUD10 million a year (Day, 2015: 29; Goot, 2015: 6). News Corp Australia has other extensive interests in the media. It owns newspapers in every state capital: indeed, it is frequently cited that News controls 60-70% of daily metro newspaper circulation nationwide (Flew and Goldsmith, 2013). However, these dailies, and their Sunday counterparts, exemplify the familiar Murdoch tabloid genre in contrast to the ‘quality’ aspirations of *The Australian*. The corporation also has popular news and commercial websites; a 50 percent share in Foxtel, the nation’s only cable television service, its own Fox sports channel, and a dominant interest in the Sky News channel (Folkenflik, 2013: 17). *The Australian* does serve to cross-promote these other interests, but more importantly, the paper’s continued existence is being carried by cross-subsidies from the profitable ventures, so it is difficult not to conclude that this arrangement is structured principally for the purpose of exerting influence.

Such corporate support by News of a loss-making broadsheet quality newspaper is not unique to Australia. On the contrary, observers have pointed to Murdoch’s acquisition of *The Times* in the UK, and *The New York Post* in the US. Neither is profitable but they provided legitimacy for News Corp as they expanded in those national markets (Goot, 2015: 16). David McKnight, who has written in depth on News Corp internationally, goes further, seeing this strategy as “designed to give Murdoch political influence and a seat at the table of national politics in three English-speaking nations” (2012a: 6). David Folkenflik similarly sees *The Australian* as reflecting the “template” which Murdoch has pursued in other world markets in the course of internationalizing News’ interests and influence (2013: 19). Given such a context, this article explores how *The Australian* might serve as a model of how proprietorial influence is mediated in practice.

In an extended critical essay, Robert Manne has examined the performance and positions taken by *The Australian* on certain key issues as characterised in this summary:

It is an unusually ideological paper, committed to advancing the causes of neoliberalism in economics and neoconservatism in foreign policy. Its style and tone are unlike that of any other newspaper in the nation’s history. *The Australian* is ruthless in pursuit of those who oppose its worldview – market fundamentalism, minimal action on climate change, the federal Intervention in indigenous affairs, uncritical support for the American alliance and for Israel, opposition to what it calls political correctness and moral relativism. It exhibits distaste, even hatred, for what it terms ‘the Left’, and in particular for the Greens. It is driven by contempt for its two natural rivals, the [competing] Fairfax press and the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation], one of which it seems to wish to destroy altogether, the other of which it seeks to discredit for its supposed left-wing bias and to reshape. ...

*The Australian* is a remorselessly campaigning paper ... The paper is also unusually self-referential and boastful, heaping extravagant praise upon itself for its acumen and prescience almost on a daily basis ... It also bears many grudges (2011: 3).

In Australia, it is no secret that *The Australian* is Murdoch’s prestige vehicle of influence. Just as millions of words have been written by international observers over the decades about Murdoch and his exertion of political influence (Shawcross, 1992; Folkenflik, 2013), similar interventions in the political processes of his country of birth have attracted attention from Australian scholars (McKnight, 2012a&b; Tiffen 2014). Their research includes a focus on the unique role of *The*

*Australian* (Cryle, 2008). Against a view still sometimes put “that Murdoch is a businessman who is ultimately more interested in profit than politics”, McKnight argues that News Corporation (now News Corp) is “as much about setting a diffuse political and cultural agenda over the long term” (2010: 304). Notably, Murdoch’s newspapers in particular are not party-political conservative as such, and have supported Labour governments at various stages in Australia, just as they have supported Labour in the UK. However, these papers, particularly *The Australian*, have subsequently been used to drive Labour governments out of office (Hobbs and McKnight, 2014). In some respects, the question of whether Murdoch’s manoeuvres are in pursuit of economic advantage or political influence is misplaced. The implacable opposition to media regulation and to public broadcasting found in his newspapers is both an expression of free market ideology and a ploy to limit competition, most currently in the field of online news (McKnight, 2010: 311).

In the broad political economy tradition, a default assumption is that ownership entails control. But just how this happens is not always demonstrated, nor is much consideration usually given to the limits and complexities of ownership and control. However, in the body of literature on Murdoch and *The Australian*, serious attention is given to the actual mediation of proprietorial influence. Some commentators have moved beyond the pamphleteering ‘vulgar Marxist’ caricature: “the assumption that influence is exercised over quivering underlings who are ‘instructed’ by evil bosses is from comic books, not the real world” (McKnight, 2012a: 11). Nevertheless, as far as Murdoch is concerned, he is seen to rule by “phone and clone” (Tiffen, 2014: 142). He has occasional, rather than regular, contact with individual editors (including personal visits) whom he has selected in the first instance for their ideological reliability, or “anticipatory compliance” (McKnight, 2012b: 37). Such figures have risen through the ranks accordingly. Significantly, editors, and/or editors-in chief, are responsible directly to Murdoch, not to in-country management (Mitchell, 2016: 151). At a collective level, observers have noted that the global meetings of senior editors and executives from around the world, which Murdoch hosts every few years, are highly politicised (McKnight, 2012b: 33-34). Murdoch has fostered a journalistic corporate culture in his own image within News, implicitly recognised by the common epithet - ‘Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation’.

The opportunity to research a particular case in News’ ownership and control came at the end of 2015, with the retirement of Chris Mitchell, the longest-serving editor-in-chief of *The Australian*. The following year he published a book of his memoirs. Furthermore, because in the previous year the paper had reached its fiftieth year of publication, a useful body of fresh critical literature had been generated. This article will show that in addition to the predictable neoliberal agenda familiar to Murdoch watchers in the US and UK, *The Australian* under Mitchell’s direction pursued campaigns of its own. Although these were not in conflict with News Corporation’s international agenda, their peculiar inflections suggest that the editor-in-chief has ‘relative autonomy’ to assert control and influence in his own right. Here, my research highlights the complex mediation of proprietorial control and points to implications beyond the particular case of *The Australian*. It should be acknowledged though, that a distinctive feature of *The Australian*’s ideological stance is its evident connection to an Australian tradition of politicised conservative Catholicism. The article also examines, in line with the paper’s international counterparts, how *The Australian*’s dichotomous view of society pits ‘the elites’ against the masses (which the paper ostensibly defends).

## The mediation of proprietorial influence

Chris Mitchell's time as editor-in-chief further consolidated a long period of managerial stability and elaborated a conservative identity for *The Australian*. Although the paper had started out as a 'small-l liberal' critic of the conservative Menzies government era (1949-1966), Murdoch's subsequent political orientations and his 'hands-on' management approach (Cryle, 2007) led to "a procession of editors – seventeen in the first 25 years" (Day, 2015: 31-32). During the years of the conservative Fraser government in Australia (1975-1983) and the ascendancy of Reagan and Thatcher internationally, Murdoch's personal politics appear to have shifted from his former economic nationalism and "social libertarianism" to a full embrace of the emergent neoliberal agenda (McKnight, 2003: 347; Cryle, 2008). In the mid-1980s, and coinciding with *The Australian* achieving true national distribution, the position of editor-in-chief was created, its first incumbent being Les Hollings, recruited from Murdoch's stable of newspapers in the UK. Hollings was himself a convert to neoliberalism, and took on "an evangelical role" (McKnight, 2003: 352) not only in the pages of *The Australian*. He assumed a public profile, thus casting a mould which Chris Mitchell would later come to fill. Indeed, Hollings had taken the young Mitchell "under his wing" in the 1980s, and later lobbied for his appointment as editor in chief, as explained below (Mitchell, 2016: 151).

Editors-in-chief have proven to be much more durable than the editors who work under them. Hollings was succeeded by veteran political journalist Paul Kelly in 1991. After holding the post until 1996, he has become 'editor at large'. He is still very closely associated with the paper, and articulates its positions almost on a daily basis. Chris Mitchell joined *The Australian* as a young journalist in 1984, and was promoted to editor in 1992, during Kelly's term. However, Lachlan Murdoch, then at Queensland Newspapers, subsequently recruited Mitchell to return to his home state as editor-in-chief of the Brisbane *Courier Mail* (Neighbour, 2011). Mitchell further secured his position in the News hierarchy during this period by returning to *The Australian* in 2002 as editor-in-chief, succeeding Australian journalist David Armstrong (1996-2002). Mitchell, in turn, after thirteen years in the role, retired in December 2015, to be succeeded by Paul Whittaker, formerly editor of *The Daily Telegraph* in Sydney (Davidson, 2015). However, with the Federal Election of 2016 approaching, Mitchell immediately returned to *The Australian*, this time as a columnist, initially offering commentary on media coverage of the election. He subsequently covered a range of other topics, mostly media-related, and still maintains a presence in the paper.

Of course, the mediation of proprietorial influence cannot be observed directly, only inferred from circumstantial evidence, and in the face of secrecy (Tiffen, 2014: 7). Yet Paul Kelly's statement of the formal organizational expectations of the editor-in-chief's position seems explicit enough:

The job of editor-in-chief is to run the paper, manage the staff and operate as the public face of the paper. This also involves dealing with Rupert Murdoch as chairman and dealing with the chief executive in Australia. The culture of the company is that it expects editors-in-chief to operate as strong leaders. They are given a lot of scope to interpret the paper's mission and the history shows that the successful editors-in-chief have done that. That is what is expected by the company; it is what is expected by Rupert Murdoch (2015: 39-40).

Informally, personal qualities and relationships matter. "Rupert loves him", one anonymous "former Murdoch confidant" says of Mitchell, while News heir-apparent Lachlan Murdoch thinks

Mitchell is “brilliant” (Quoted in Neighbour, 2011). Bruce Guthrie, a former News editor, believes that Mitchell ...

second guesses Rupert Murdoch more than anyone I know in that organization. You could see him, on almost anything, running through his mind ‘what would Rupert think?’ That’s why he’s survived so long. And clearly he’s got Rupert’s backing, which trumps everything. Everything (Quoted in Neighbour, 2011).

However, we should not think of these perceptions as evidence that the editor is the proprietor’s “faithful lapdog” (McKnight, 2012b: 13) or even an ideological soul-mate. On the contrary, the proprietor’s confidence that Mitchell enjoyed facilitated his relative autonomy in the role of editor-in-chief. As Kelly put it, there was “a lot of scope to interpret the paper’s mission”. Mitchell’s time at the *Courier Mail* allowed him to earn a reputation as a campaigning editor. He advocated investigations into indigenous issues and the police corruption then current. He also formed a friendship with Kevin Rudd, who became a Federal politician and subsequent leader of the Labor Opposition. Once back at *The Australian* and in the role of editor-in-chief, Mitchell persuaded an initially reluctant Murdoch that the newspaper should back Rudd, and hence Labor, in the 2007 election; “We talked the proprietor around”, he said (Quoted by Kelly, 2015: 37). The Rudd government was subsequently elected. Mitchell and Rudd were later to fall out, and *The Australian* turned mercilessly against his government. However, it is important to remember that Murdoch initially went with Mitchell’s judgment on how the paper’s power should be wielded.

There were other items on Mitchell’s agenda when he returned triumphant to *The Australian* from the *Courier Mail*. Although he had abandoned his own academic studies in history, Mitchell had made a pre-emptive strike against what he saw to be the Australian history establishment. The *Courier Mail* published a ‘special’ alleging that the eminent late historian Charles Manning Clark had been a Communist “agent of influence”. Although the claims were subsequently condemned by the Australian Press Council, Mitchell was unabashed (Neighbour, 2011), and remains so (Mitchell, 2016: 210-214).

Subsequently, at *The Australian*, Mitchell promoted the provocative work of a revisionist historian, Keith Windschuttle, who claimed to show that very few Aborigines had been killed during the colonisation of Tasmania. The ‘black armband’ consensus amongst the historians Windschuttle attacked was that the Aborigines were all but wiped out. Also, whilst still at the *Courier Mail*, Mitchell had engaged Noel Pearson, a prominent indigenous spokesperson, as a columnist (Anonymous, 2003). At *The Australian*, he went on to privilege Pearson as the voice of indigenous Australia, and marginalised other indigenous perspectives in the process. So, whilst *The Australian*, to its credit, has done much to advance public concern about indigenous issues, this has been very much framed in the terms which Mitchell has chosen (Manne, 2011: 6-14).

Another front in the ongoing ‘culture wars’ that Mitchell brought to *The Australian* from the *Courier Mail* was educational curricula. In Queensland, the *Courier Mail* had run an extended campaign against a proposed new school subject in the state, the Study of Society and the Environment, on the grounds that it was too critical (Anonymous, 2003). Similarly, under Mitchell as editor-in-chief of *The Australian*, there were strenuous interventions against the introduction of a national secondary school curriculum. A central theme was the ostensibly “Left-wing” bias in the history subject, indicated by the absence of “any appreciation of wealth creation” (Cater, 2014). Mitchell’s continuing legacy in *The Australian* was apparent in its 2016 campaign against the adoption of a “Safe Schools” program, which involved advising children on matters of LGBTI

sexuality. This was condemned as ‘social engineering’ (Bita, 2016). Mitchell has clearly pursued his own agenda via *The Australian*. Given his effectiveness in also pursuing the proprietor’s views and the absence of any conflict with that, he has enjoyed a unique position of influence. In his memoir Mitchell boasts of his “realignment of the paper towards the centre-right” (2016: 22); affirms the various political judgments and editorial positions he took on the issues of his time; details with relish a number of investigative interventions he directed at *The Australian* (“war stories”); and explains his relation to Murdoch:

I like Rupert, and my mind works much the way his does. My attitudes to free markets and politics have been naturally similar to his since long before I became a newspaper editor. The unvarnished truth is that I did not need Rupert directing me. All my campaigns were my own ideas. And of course, because our world views are similar, I never ran any of those campaign ideas past Rupert; nor did I ever receive criticism - or indeed praise – from him for any of those campaigns (2016: 92-93).

## Conservative Catholicism

One distinctive dimension of Mitchell’s regime at *The Australian* largely overlooked in the critical literature is the extent to which conservative Catholic perspectives are represented. One commentator in the alternative media does refer to *The Australian* as the “*Catholic Boys Daily*” (Ackland, 2015), while another more seriously identifies its “National Civic Council agenda” (Anonymous, 2003). This is a reference to a still extant organization which, because of its extreme anti-Communism, caused bitter divisions in both the Catholic Church and the Australian Labour Party in the 1950s and 1960s. The NCC’s impact on the Australian political landscape was profound, not least because of the split it caused in the ALP when Catholic members broke away to form the Democratic Labor Party. An extremely influential figure in all these developments, and heading the NCC, was BA Santamaria (Duncan, 2001). When Gerard Henderson, a regular weekly columnist and prominent conservative commentator published a biography of Santamaria in 2015, he was given a full page in *The Weekend Australian*. There was also a full page facing by another admiring historian of Santamaria’s legacy (August 1-2). Santamaria had himself been a columnist on *The Australian* during the 1970s and 1980s (Cryle, 2008: 208-209). A more significant contemporary connection was that Santamaria had been mentor to Tony Abbott, Prime Minister from 2013 to 2015. He received conditional support, and much free advice, both in print and in private, from *The Australian* over his term. Abbott himself had once worked under Mitchell at *The Australian* (Mitchell, 2016: 56-74).

Other prominent Catholic figures who have been granted a platform in the paper include the late Frank Devine, a former editor of Murdoch newspapers in the US. He was a one-time editor of *The Australian*, and subsequently a columnist. The Archdiocese of Sydney lauded him in an obituary on his death in 2009 (Catholic Communications, 2009). Devine’s daughter Miranda is a controversial conservative commentator on News’ Sydney tabloids, the *Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph*. A Devine family friend was another columnist on *The Australian*, Jane Fraser. Her death in 2015 drew a tribute from Cardinal George Pell, former Archbishop of Sydney (September 24). Other columnists now deceased who deserve mention in this connection are an atheist embraced by the Catholics, Paddy McGuinness, who was also editor of the conservative journal *Quadrant* for many years, and Christopher Pearson, a convert to Catholicism (Owen, 2009).

Other regular writers on *The Australian* with Catholic connections are the education commentator, Kevin Donnelly, an academic at the Australian Catholic University, and Greg

Craven, the vice-chancellor of that university, who is a frequent contributor. The foreign editor, Greg Sheridan, on occasion has paraded his Catholicism. A weekly columnist who pontificates explicitly on family and moral issues is Angela Shanahan. She is an active Catholic, and married to Denis Shanahan, the chief political editor of *The Australian*, who is a frequent front-page commentator (Mercatornet, 2016). There is also an occasional contributor, Tess Livingstone who writes specifically on Catholic issues, notably the Papal encyclical on climate change in 2015 (June 20). She was joined by several other leading commentators on *The Australian* in denouncing the Pope's perceived shift to the Left. She was also involved in the defence of Cardinal George Pell. Before becoming a Cardinal, Pell had held the most senior posts in Australia, notably as Archbishop of Melbourne and then of Sydney. In 2016, a Royal Commission into child abuse had asked Pell difficult questions about covering up instances of abuse. As Pell's authorised biographer, Livingstone, alongside various other columnists (including Gerard Henderson) sought to uphold Pell's reputation against critics of his response (March 5).

None of this is to suggest that *The Australian* has been captured by a cabal of Catholic conservatives, although it would be naïve to think it is just coincidence. Yet if Mitchell allowed the paper to play host to such a network, it is not necessarily because of his own Catholic background, and whatever personal faith might have endured from that. One can only speculate, but according to some of Mitchell's acquaintances, his mother's experience as a refugee from Europe imbued him with an anti-Communist worldview that may have been at least as formative as his Catholic education (Neighbour, 2011). So, it should not be thought that Mitchell has been pursuing a personal conservative Catholic agenda as such. That would be untenable for the paper's public persona, and a commercial anathema in a society that has moved beyond the sectarianism of the past. Such an agenda would also clash with the "strong Protestant evangelical trait" discernible in the family background of Rupert Murdoch (McKnight, 2012a: 7; Roberts, 2015). Conservative Catholicism found a symbiotic relationship with *The Australian* because it is integral and instrumental to a more comprehensive and secular ideological worldview within which even the Pope can be seen as 'Left-wing'.

## **'Elites' discourse**

It has been stated that "Mitchell and Murdoch share a view of themselves as outsiders whose job it is to poke the establishment in the eye" (Neighbour, 2011). But what is 'the establishment' if it is not represented by the national daily newspaper? Although *The Australian* projects an exalted view of its own importance and authority ("The Heart of the Nation" says the masthead), and adopts an imperious tone in its editorials and commentary, there is a disingenuous counter-positioning of itself as a vigilant adversary against the ostensible influence of the 'elites'. A study of how the "semantic grammar" of this discourse about elites became elaborated in *The Australian* and other News Corp papers from 1996 to 2002 found that the elites were defined in political and cultural terms, and unrelated to class, economic, business or management hierarchies. The discourse had a binary structure, pitting elites against non-elites - an antagonistic relationship in which the elites always had the advantage (Scalmer and Goot, 2004). Society in this view is dichotomised "between elites selfishly pursuing a social justice and environmental agenda and ordinary taxpayers who just want to pay off their mortgage" (Sawer, 2003).

Who are these elites, and what is the basis of their power? Essentially, they are "small-l liberal elites who have captured government, the mass media, science and the universities and whose ideas

on culture and politics dominate by virtue of the orthodoxy of “political correctness” (McKnight, 2012a: 8). There is a history and an international context to this rhetoric about elites, in that its origins can be traced to neoconservatives in the United States in the 1970s, who argued that the radical 1960s generation formed a ‘new class’ that had taken over the public sector and communication industries (Sawer, 2003). In similar vein, Christopher Lasch had denounced the values of liberal-minded knowledge workers, creatives and professionals in the US, but distinguished them as an elite rather than a class, “in the sense that their livelihood rests not so much on the ownership of property as on the manipulation of information and professional expertise” (1994). A decade later in Australia, in *The Twilight of the Elites*, David Flint explains,

The term ‘elite’ is thus a useful, although mildly pejorative, reference to a way of thinking now common in the media, in some university faculties and in the arts. It is to be contrasted with traditional thought, whose advocates are clearly in a minority in those circles, but who represent and enunciate the commonsense, pragmatic views of the vast majority of Australians (2003).

Although writing in this instance in the NCC publication *News Weekly*, in an extract from his book, Flint declares himself as a great friend of *The Australian*, both as an occasional commentator and frequently published contributor to the letters page. He makes the point that, in spite of having been a distinguished legal academic, chair of both the Australian Press Council and the Australian Broadcasting Authority, and ongoing convener of Australians for Constitutional Monarchy, people such as himself are not “elite”. Rather, he cites Lasch to the effect that elites are defined not so much by social position, but more by their liberal values, being “left-wing on social and cultural issues”. The dichotomy posited between entrenched elites and the disenfranchised rest is quite evident in the quote given, and further, it yields some insight into what is at stake with this strategy: the struggle to define and control where the middle ground, or ‘mainstream’ of opinion lies, which *The Australian* claims to speak for.

The notion of “political correctness” has a similar provenance, having been first expounded in U.S. conservative circles with the same disingenuous argument that traditional core values had been swamped by “the Left” (Cultural Marxism, 2011). Commentators in *The Australian* have expounded this narrative on a number of occasions, reproducing all of its fallacies. A recent example is ABC journalist Chris Uhlman (February 20 2016), an ironic coup for a newspaper that sees the ABC as its arch-rival (Wilson, 2016).

Scalmer and Goot’s study found that while there was no agreement amongst News commentators as to who the elites were, most defined them in political terms. They were said to be organized around movements or institutions, and were often named ideologically, such as the “politically correct”. Significantly, elites were also referred to by sociocultural indicators (“the establishment media”, “tertiary-educated”), and given spatial location: “urban”, “inner metropolitan” (2004: 137-138). In more recent years, elites have also been defined as a category of consumers, identifiable by certain indicators of consumption and lifestyle, such as “chardonnay socialists” or “latte Left”. These terms constitute a discourse in the sense that they are rhetorical rather than analytical in intent. The dichotomy that this elite discourse asserts is an ideological myth and a sociological absurdity, even in terms of traditional conservative discourse, which saw the middle class, by definition, as the centre of society. They were “the backbone of this country”, as former Prime Minister Menzies put it, a mediating political and cultural bulwark between the rich and the workers. *The Australian’s* discourse can be seen as a strategic response to the fact that a

more educated “moral middle class” has shifted towards progressive values in recent decades (Brett, 2003). This has promoted a binary system of values and downplayed the complexities of class and social diversity.

Yet it has to be acknowledged that, in Australia as elsewhere, there is a social divide created by higher education as manifested in values and opinions, and that higher-educated persons are still in a minority (Simons, 2005). However, elite discourse caricatures the divide and discredits educated values and opinions as being out of touch with the non-elites that *The Australian's* discourse pretends to speak for. Further, educated opinion is not represented as having legitimate authority, but as the self-serving views of “inner-city elites” who have taken over the ABC and the universities. They are positioned in the discourse as being arrogant and contemptuous of the ostensible mainstream: they are “snobs”, “sneering at ordinary people” with their “moral vanity” (any stance based on declared principles or values is dismissed as “vanity”). In addition, there is a whiff of treachery: the more cosmopolitan orientation of educated perspectives is easily represented as “un-Australian” (Sawer, 2003; Scalmer and Goot, 2004). As noted, this is a discursive strategy which enables “so-called progressive” views to be stigmatised while at the same time allowing conservative positions to masquerade as occupying the middle ground. Its non-reflexive character passes unnoticed – that is, the conservative commentators neither acknowledge their own elite status, nor their assumed role as ventriloquists purporting to speak for the non-elites. Not only in *The Australian*, but in the Murdoch empire internationally, this anti-elitist populism has combined with Murdoch’s advocacy of free markets to form a “market populist” ideology which serves his business interests as well (McKnight, 2010: 312).

It was noted above that in *The Australian's* elite discourse, elites are political and cultural, not economic: corporate and management hierarchies are not seen as “elites”. Therefore, it seems counter-intuitive to read, in *The Australian's* pitch to prospective advertisers, that it is “the news brand with exclusive access to Australia’s wealthy and powerful” (News Corp Australia, 2016). Traditionally, its readership profile is “heavily skewed toward businesspeople (especially men), managers, professionals and semi-professionals; toward people with university education; and toward those with relatively high disposable incomes” (Scalmer and Goot, 2004: 142). From a political economy point of view, *The Australian* struggles to manage an ongoing contradiction between its editorial and commercial sides. While the chardonnay-swilling, latte-sipping inner-urban elites might be sneered at by commentators in the opinion pages, their cosmopolitan consumer culture provides the repertoire for features on food, travel and lifestyles in *The Weekend Australian*. This content attracts the advertisers of restaurants, overseas holiday packages, stylish homewares, cultural events, galleries, books and films. There is also a monthly magazine insert, *Wish*, though that is aimed more at “high net worth individuals”, that is, rich people, with advertisements for luxury cars, designer furniture and clothes, watches and jewellery. It requires a considerable suspension of disbelief not to think of this target market as ‘elite’ in the common meaning of the word.

Former editor-in-chief Mitchell’s declared thinking in this regard is interesting. While he values the organisational separation of editorial and commercial functions within News Corp as a safeguard of journalistic quality and integrity, he has definite ideas on how to deal with the challenges posed by the internet (to the traditional business model of the press). He appreciates “the value of engaged, educated and wealthy audiences” such as the readership of *The Australian*, not only for their capacity to attract the advertisers of luxury goods but also for their willingness to pay

an online subscription: Mitchell has been an enthusiastic supporter of the paywall business model which Murdoch began to advocate in 2009 (2016b: 180-187).

### **Other ideological themes in *The Australian***

Marian Sawyer argues that the US neoconservatives' "new class" rhetoric, cited above, has been fused with neoliberal public choice theory, so that a "market populist worldview" has developed:

The market populist worldview dismisses concern with equality of opportunity or human rights as the ideology of the new class or special interests, who speak in the name of equality but create privilege for themselves and welfare dependency for others. (2003)

*The Australian* is explicit in its neoliberalism. Paul Kelly has declared that "The paper stands for a competitive, market-based economy ... *The Australian* in recent times has resisted the narrow, development sceptic, pro-state intervention values of the Sydney and Melbourne cultural elites" (2015: 39). Consequently, for social critics to draw attention to the widening inequality gap in Australia is tantamount to "class war". This standpoint implies a more visceral and psychosocial motivation, dismissed as the "politics of envy". A recent illustration of the market populist rhetoric comes from Associate Editor Chris Kenny:

In a political debate characterised by moral vanity and class envy, it increasingly seems the so-called compassionate Left insists on using the poor as stage props in its advocacy for policies that actually will hurt welfare recipients and low-income earners (2016).

Any criticism of the conservative order that *The Australian* stands to defend is not even acknowledged as a disagreement, or a legitimate but wrong-headed point of view: it is denied authenticity. The voices of opposition are characterised as insincere and manipulative: "confected outrage" is a favourite epithet. It was used recently by Chris Mitchell himself in one of his columns, when public debate on migration policy was said to generate "a whole day of confected outrage". This was reported on Foxtel Sky News (Mitchell 2016a). Along with 'class war', a similar psychosocial reductionism often employed against anyone who criticises their own society is 'self-hatred'. Terms such as 'hatred', when attributed to opponents, imply that their perspectives are emotional and personal, and have no rational, objective basis.

Chris Mitchell is said to remember the 1960s, but with extreme prejudice, and is committed to rolling back the changes set in motion by the movements of those years. He has a particular antipathy to the Green Party, and the whole environmental movement (Anonymous, 2003). *The Australian's* ambivalent treatment of environmental issues deserves an article in its own right: here it is sufficient to mention the support given by *The Australian* to climate change 'contrarian' Bjorn Lomborg in his attempt to establish a base in an Australian university during 2015. His overtures were rejected by two universities, which commentators in *The Australian* denounced as an offence against free speech. In addition to his occasional contributions, Lomborg was subsequently given a personal column to comment upon the Paris Climate Summit in December 2015. Mitchell claims the paper has accepted the reality of climate change for some years, but it continues to provide a platform to the sceptics (Elliott, 2010; Lloyd, 2010). In this regard, *The Australian* seems to have only reluctantly fallen in step with News Corp internationally. While formerly a climate change sceptic, Rupert Murdoch somehow came to recognise the threat of climate change, and announced

this Damascene conversion in a global broadcast to all his employees in May, 2007 (McKnight, 2010: 308).

In addition to the regular and the occasional columns that appear in the “Commentary” opinion pages of *The Australian*, there is of course the editorial, plus letters to the editor, short emails from readers, a cartoon, and a feature, “Cut & Paste”. Both the editorial and the cartoon express the paper’s position on selected current issues of concern, in step with the news reporting, while readers’ letters and emails also tend to lend support to the paper’s perspectives. While readers’ opinion can be easily orchestrated through editorial bias in favour of supportive letters and emails, it is quite plausible that the letters published do reflect the conservatism of the paper’s readership. However, it should be noted that some letter writers appear repeatedly (such as David Flint, as previously mentioned), so it is most likely that the letter writers represent a small but active pool within a broader range of readership. Cut & Paste snidely juxtaposes short quotations, usually from the paper’s declared enemies in the competitor Fairfax press, the ABC, the Labor and Green parties. These are taken entirely out of time and context in order to make the quotes hypocritical or merely foolish. Although *The Australian* also publishes opinion pieces on these pages from selected spokespersons commissioned from ‘the Left’ (that is, any position more moderate than *The Australian*’s conservative ambit), the overall impression given by the Commentary section is that of a comforting, complacent, conservative consensus.

Again, the paper is non-reflexive, as well as unapologetic, about this conservatism. While it refers constantly to the alleged left-of-centre “groupthink” of the ABC, *The Australian* likes to present itself as the very embodiment as well as the champion of diversity of opinion and free speech. Similarly, Mitchell prides himself on *The Australian*’s investigative reporting and campaigns, while denouncing the ABC’s investigative reporting as illegitimate “activism” (2016b: 192-194). In the mythic dichotomy between selfish elites and worthy masses, there is a bifurcation between Left and Right. Any point of view, or person, must necessarily be classified as one or the other. In this context, *The Australian* represents its conservative worldview as the centre, the mainstream norm, rather than right-wing. Throughout his memoir, *Making Headlines*, Mitchell refers to his circle of senior writers on *The Australian* as his “friends”, even “dear friends”. This suggests that he surrounded himself with a coterie of like-minded individuals and hand-picked conservative mavericks willing to participate in his campaigns and even do his “dirty work”. He has not the sense, nor the willingness to admit, that this is the “groupthink” and “activism” of the Right, pitted against what he sees to be that of the “progressive” media of the “Left”, notably the ABC and the Fairfax press (2016b: 156-159).

There is much more that could be said about *The Australian*’s imposition of itself into national life and the public sphere. It seeks to influence both government and opposition with the abundant advice given in editorials, columns and news commentary; and with its own campaigns and management of information. Detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this article, and would require too much explanation about the current state of politics in Australia. What the article has sought to demonstrate, in the light of common assumptions about proprietorial influence, has been the relative autonomy of the editor-in-chief position on *The Australian*, particularly in the case of Chris Mitchell’s tenure of this position from 2002 to 2015. The continuities between Mitchell’s preoccupations evident during his time at the *Courier Mail* and then at *The Australian* have been outlined, and his apparent accommodation with conservative Catholicism and “new class” rhetoric about “elites” have been explored.

Certainly these elements have been clearly evident in *The Australian* over recent years, and especially in the last quarter of 2015 when this author was gathering research material. However, it must be acknowledged that during the first six months of 2016, under Paul Whittaker, there has been no perceptible difference in the themes discussed here. There has been a campaign about school curriculum, as noted; apologetic treatment of Cardinal Pell has continued; and there has been no contraction of the rhetorical lexicon. Indeed, “the politics of envy” became a catch-cry in *The Australian*’s commentary on Labour in the 2016 election campaign, as the paper sought to characterise Labor’s claim to “fairness” as instead a “class war” against business.

So, the new editor-in-chief has not, at least as yet, put his own stamp upon the paper in the manner of his predecessor. And he may not, for as noted, Chris Mitchell still has a presence on *The Australian*. Apart from being Whittaker’s former boss (Whittaker was editor at *The Australian* under Mitchell from 2007 to 2011), Mitchell had lobbied management to put Whittaker into the latter’s previous job as editor of *The Daily Telegraph* (Mitchell, 2016b: 159). Furthermore, “persons familiar with the matter” agree that Mitchell exerts an exceptional personal authority. Several former colleagues of Mitchell interviewed by Sally Neighbour for her portrait essay of him say he inspires “an intense tribal loyalty”. Yet while some had acceded to his reportedly obsessive control over the paper (“It’s Chris’s newspaper” said one of his former editors), others were in fear of him. Like the Brisbane journalist cited earlier in this presentation (Anonymous, 2003), Neighbour says two-thirds of her interviewees wished to remain anonymous. One said, “You can’t be quoted in relation to Chris Mitchell. He’s so vindictive. If you come out and bag him, you know he’ll use the newspaper to attack you” (2011). Mitchell has been known to threaten to “use every journalistic and legal measure available” against his critics (cited in Tiffen, 2014: 209). Notably, this occurred in the case of a journalism academic he claimed had defamed him (Elliot, 2010). He is said to maintain a “black list” of perceived enemies who are to be either sidelined as *personae non grata*, or alternatively, pilloried in the news and commentary pages of *The Australian* (Hobbs and Owen, 2016: 140). This is not to suggest that Mitchell continues to wield influence by intimidation, or even that he maintains his former rank. However, it is difficult to imagine that he has readily relinquished the personal power base he had acquired as editor-in-chief, and quietly settled for the role of columnist as consolation. Ultimately, of course, it is actually Rupert’s newspaper, but it remains in safe hands for him as long as Chris Mitchell is around. Indeed, Mitchell’s aggression may even be part of “the job description for Murdoch editors” (Tiffen, 2014: 209) in “one of the most aggressive corporate cultures in the world” (McKnight, 2012b: 237). In the longer term and from a global perspective, it remains to be seen whether Rupert’s successors will want to maintain an unprofitable business in a declining medium for the sake of exerting political influence in Australia.

## Author Bio

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