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**December 14, 2009****THE MEDIA EQUATION**

## **Under Murdoch, Tilting Rightward at The Journal**

By [DAVID CARR](#)

Sunday was the second anniversary of the sale of The Wall Street Journal to [Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation](#). At that time, a chorus of journalism church ladies (I was among them) warned that one of the crown jewels of American journalism now resided in the hands of a roughneck, and predicted that he would use it to his own ends.

Yet here we are, two years later, and The Wall Street Journal still hits my doorstep every morning as one of the nation's premier newspapers.

But under Mr. Murdoch's leadership, the newspaper is no longer anchored by those deep dives into the boardrooms of American business with quaint stippled portraits, opting instead for a much broader template of breaking general interest news articles with a particular interest in politics and big splashy photos. Glenn R. Simpson, who left the newspaper back in March, is not a fan of the newsier, less analytical Journal.

"Murdoch didn't ruin The Wall Street Journal; he just rendered it into a much more ordinary paper," he said.

But there are growing indications that Mr. Murdoch, a lifelong conservative, doesn't just want to cover politics, he wants to play them as well.

A little over a year ago, [Robert Thomson](#), The Journal's top editor, picked Gerard Baker, a columnist for The Times of London, as his deputy managing editor. Mr. Baker is a former Washington bureau chief of The Financial Times with a great deal of expertise in the Beltway. The two men came of age in the more partisan milieu of British journalism.

According to several former members of the Washington bureau and two current ones, the two men have had a big impact on the paper's Washington coverage, adopting a more conservative tone, and editing and headlining articles to reflect a chronic skepticism of the current administration. And given that the paper's circulation continues to grow, albeit helped along by some discounts, there's nothing to suggest that The Journal's readers don't approve.

Mr. Baker, a neoconservative columnist of acute political views, has been especially active in managing coverage in Washington, creating significant grumbling, if not resistance, from the staff there. Reporters say the coverage of the Obama administration is reflexively critical, the health care debate is generally framed in

terms of costs rather than benefits — “[health care reform](#)” is a generally forbidden phrase — and [global warming](#) skeptics have gotten a steady ride. (Of course, objectivity is in the eyes of the reader.)

The pro-business, antigovernment shift in the news pages has broken into plain view in the last year. On Aug. 12, a fairly straight down the middle front page article on [President Obama](#)'s management style ended up with [the provocative headline](#), “A President as Micromanager: How Much Detail Is Enough?” The original article included a contrast between President [Jimmy Carter](#)'s tendency to go deep in the weeds of every issue with President [George W. Bush](#)'s predilection for minimal involvement, according to someone who saw the draft. By the time the article ran, it included only the swipe at Mr. Carter.

On Aug. 27, a fairly straightforward obituary about [Ted Kennedy](#) for the Web site was subjected to a little political re-education on the way to the front page. A new paragraph was added quoting [Rush Limbaugh](#) deriding what he called all of the “slobbering media coverage,” and he also accused the recently deceased senator of being the kind of politician who “uses the government to take money from people who work and gives it to people who don't work.”

On Oct. 31, an article on the front of the B section about [estate taxes](#) at the state level used the phrase “death tax” six times, but there were no quotation marks around it. A month later, the newspaper's Style & Substance blog suggested that the adoption of such a loaded political term was probably not a good idea: “Because opponents of estate taxes have long referred to them as death taxes, the term should be avoided in news stories.”

In response to questions about bias in the newspaper, a Journal spokesman sent along the following statement: “The Journal has always provided its readers with unique, objective news reporting from our Washington Bureau.”

None of the reporters involved in those articles spoke to me, but several others did.

“A lot of it is about what goes into the pipeline and then what does, and does not, come out,” said a reporter who works at the Washington bureau and who, like others, did not want to be identified out of concern for retribution. The reporter said articles at The Wall Street Journal ended up looking out of step with other coverage because an agenda may have been at work.

Tension between Washington bureaus and headquarters is a common feature of newspapers, and none of the people I spoke to suggested that either Mr. Thomson or Mr. Baker lacked savvy as journalists or leaders — only that ideology was baked into the coverage through headlines, assignments and editing in a way that had never occurred in the past.

“When it was just Robert, we were able to win more arguments, but now that it is both he and Baker, it pretty much goes the way they say it will,” said another current member of the staff.

Several Washington staff members speculated that John Bussey, the current bureau chief, may soon be replaced by Gerald F. Seib, the former bureau chief. (Curiously, Mr. Seib is very much in the old Journal mold and hardly what anybody in the business would call a pushover.)

While blending politics and journalism may come as an unpleasant surprise to the people who work at The

Journal, it is standard operating procedure for Mr. Murdoch, who sees newspapers in the British model — as players in the worlds they cover.

“For him, it is all about the fight,” said Sarah Ellison, a former media reporter at The Journal who has written a book due out in May, “War at The Wall Street Journal: Inside the Struggle to Control an American Business Empire.”

“It is an excellent paper,” Ms. Ellison said. “But it is entirely transformed from what it used to be.”

It certainly doesn't appear that the \$5 billion purchase of the newspaper was a big financial success — the News Corporation took a \$2.4 billion write-down on the purchase — and Michael Nathanson of Sanford C. Bernstein said the Bancroft family, which sold the paper, “now look like geniuses” and described the purchase as “one of the worst media deals in history.”

But Mr. Murdoch and his lieutenants have made two significant bets: that the cachet and reputation of The Wall Street Journal are elastic enough to encompass a much broader array of news and that objectivity in a general-interest newspaper is a losing strategy.

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