In a recent interview with The New York Times, Rupert Murdoch downplayed the idea that he is, as the newspaper put it, “the most powerful figure in English-language media.” He demurred: “That is flattering, but it is just not true.” Still, with his newspaper holdings in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States; his expanding television news operations in the mega-markets of India and China; and his plans to spend $6.6 billion for controlling interest in satellite broadcaster DirecTV, it’s hard to see who else occupies a position of so much influence in the communications business, English-language or otherwise.

Long before terms like globalization and convergence were on the lips of media executives everywhere, Murdoch was building his transnational holdings of print and broadcast news outlets. Over the years his touch for tabloidization has repeatedly proven the upside of going down market, and he’s shown that what works with ink on paper can also apply to newer media. As he pushed his upstart Fox News Network past cable pioneer CNN in the U.S. ratings. Along the way he has also displayed a delicate skill in straddling various partisan fences, shifting his weight from liberal to conservative—and sometimes back-on three different continents as circumstances and opportunities have evolved.

Whatever one thinks of his politics, his faith in the market advantages of appealing to the average person’s bad taste or the sometimes messy way he has conducted his personal life (three wives and the possibility of nasty succession battle among his offspring), one has to acknowledge Murdoch’s skill in creating a corporate empire. Accordingly a book that is subtitled “10 secrets of the world’s greatest deal maker” is one that scholars, media critics and market analysts alike might find indispensable. Unfortunately, Stuart Crainer’s “Business the Rupert Murdoch Way” fails to deliver on this extravagant promise.

Murdoch, Crainer tells us, operates within a “carefully constructed carapace of privacy and mystery.” That description may have been true at one time, and it is certainly the case that some of Murdoch’s early business successes came about in part because he was misunderstood or underestimated. But by now Murdoch’s signature strategy of “shock and gall” can hardly be described as mysterious.

The central problem here is that there are few secrets to be learned about the way Murdoch does business. The Australian-born U.S. citizen has had an amazing career and an immense effect on media. But he has done little that has escaped notice. Admirers and critics alike have chronicled his actions on the media stage, and they’ve been aided by the fact that Murdoch hasn’t tried very hard to keep his methods and strategies hidden from view. “With Murdoch, what you see is what you get,” wrote Michael Leapman in his 1985 autobiography, “Arrogant Aussie: The Rupert Murdoch Story.”

Indeed the secrets about Murdoch that Crainer purports to reveal are almost wholly self-evident, starting with Secret No. 1: Go with the Flow. The author’s...
other insights include that Murdoch has a demanding management style, is willing to take risks and pays fierce attention to financial detail—traits that hardly distinguish him from thousands of less well known, and less successful, business executives.

Headlines, or in this case subtitles, that overpromise have long been a staple with Murdoch, and so it is perhaps fitting that a book about his business techniques would fail to live up to its billing. Crainer decries the fact that Murdoch has gotten little scholarly attention for his management style, which the author ascribes partly to the media mythology that depicts Murdoch as a one-dimensional "ogre" and partly to snobbery toward a man who enjoys playing the role of outsider. But Murdoch is such a singular figure that it is hard to see how much can be learned in the way of abiding or transferable principles from studying his management methods. Like Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, Murdoch is changing the rules of the game in ways that will surely outlive him. But it’s hard to see how executives lacking Murdoch’s forceful personality and drive could gain by patterning their careers on his.

It takes nothing away from Murdoch’s accomplishments to say that much of his success can be ascribed to a simple lesson he learned from his father based on the career of Alfred Harmsworth, the British press baron better known as Lord Northcliffe. Northcliffe’s ability to be "simple and direct in his purposes," drew the attention of the elder Murdoch. "That I think is the secret of his success," he added. "He knows what he wants and goes straight for it."

Unlike Pulitzer, but like Hearst and Northcliffe, Murdoch started his media career with a leg up. He was educated at Oxford and later inherited a newspaper. He was able to learn his early business lessons in the relatively protected Australian market, and by the time he was ready to move on he had the added advantage that the people he was dealing with were wholly unprepared for the ease with which Murdoch could go back on his word, fire old friends and substitute expediency for editorial judgment.

Crainer also fails to deal with the fact that Murdoch’s legend may be seriously diminished by the time he heads off into retirement. Murdoch bet wrong on the Internet, not once like most of his media peers but twice. After first predicting that it would "destroy more businesses than it creates," Murdoch then tried to buy his way into the Web party late in 1999, just as the techno-bubble was getting ready to burst. A year later he was taking a $200 million charge to restructure his company’s partnership with a health care site called WebMD. His deal for DirecTV has also drawn some skeptics who question the price that he is paying as well as the future competitiveness of satellite distribution.

More than anything else Murdoch’s career demonstrates the applicability of Gresham’s Law to the media industry. Just as bad money drives out good, a media executive who plays to the basest instincts of readers and viewers while seeking the highest possible financial returns can indeed cause others to follow his lead. The resulting loss is felt both in terms of the way the news is covered and the way a society conducts itself. For evidence of how Fox News is changing the values of broadcast journalists in the United States, one need not look far beyond the almost jingoistic way the invasion of Iraq was delivered to television screens across America. It’s foolish to hope that this coarsening effect can be easily reversed. Crainer is right in arguing that because of his already global and yet growing influence Murdoch deserves closer scrutiny and more sophisticated analysis than he has had in the past. But this thin book, less than 150 pages long and organized around the 10 supposed secrets of Murdoch’s success, does not hit that target.

Rating

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Rating Points: excellent: ++++ poor: +

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