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**Beecher, Eric - *The Men Who Killed the News: The inside story of how media moguls abused their power, manipulated the truth and distorted democracy*, Scribner, Sydney, (pp. 416), 2024. ISBN13: 9781761428043**

Reviewed by Lynette Sheridan Burns - Western Sydney University

This is a book for our times, and for anyone who has wondered why public trust of journalism is at an all-time low. Highly respected editor and media proprietor Eric Beecher[1] lays out how society got this point and why. At its core, this book presents the most uncomfortable truth about journalism – that while journalists may be motivated to serve the public discourse and speak truth to power, those who disseminate their work are motivated by exclusively by profit. Eric Beecher's incisive expose chronicles how media moguls have, according to the book's subtitle, since the outset of commercial journalism in the 19th century, 'abused their power, manipulated the truth and distorted democracy'.

He begins in the industrial revolution and continues through the 20th century and the so-called golden age of journalism, when it seemed that advertising 'rivers of gold' would never end and would continue to protect the 'objectivity' of journalism. He lays out with sobering clarity that this perceived separation between the business and the journalism was always an illusion drawing on a wide range of news organisations' histories around the world to make this point. Media owners are expected to maintain the ethical traditions of journalism for a civil society but are incentivised to exploit this power.

Beecher convincingly blames centuries of ethical failures by media proprietors for the apparently unstoppable decline in public trust in journalism. He also calls out most legacy media for mostly failing to adapt to the impact of social media and internet on its former monopoly on news. His strongest criticism for Rupert Murdoch's *Fox News*. He writes:

Nothing in the history of abuse of media power since the 1880s comes close to the squalid role paid by *Fox News* in monetizing bigotry and resentment (218).

He then considers the impact of the digital revolution and consider a future where artificial intelligence threatens the integrity and viability of journalism. The media as we knew it is broken, he concludes:

The truth is that journalism has always operated as a kind of mirage. The people who consume it have never paid what it costs to produce. And the people who funded most of those costs, the advertisers, never had a say on what was produced because they were paying for a different product – access to the audience. To me, this misalignment of incentives always felt uneasy. And finally, it has proved to be untenable (300).

Beecher then asks if it possible for journalism to fulfil its democratic function without financial subsidies from those with deep pockets and no interest in democracies. In the end, he returns to the responsibility of news publishers to strengthen public trust in their outputs.

Somewhat idealistically, he calls for those who own the media – both traditional and social – to demonstrate a real commitment to professional conduct that ethical, non-ideological and believable. But he should be taken seriously, because, as he says, this type of journalism is "a prerequisite for a decent society" (326).

*The Men Who Killed the News* is a comprehensive and sobering read for anyone invested in the future of our society.

About the reviewer

**Dr Lynette Sheridan Burns** is an Adjunct Professor of Journalism at Western Sydney University. She entered journalism in the 1970s 'golden age' when journalists were encouraged to believe there was a barrier between news business and the publishing business. More than 30 years of critical reflection as a journalism educator has (sadly) disabused her of this notion.

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[1] Eric Beecher is an Australian journalist, editor, and media proprietor. He is chair of Solstice Media and Private Media, publisher of independent news outlet *Crikey.com*. He has worked as journalist for *The Age*, *The Sunday Times* and *The Washington Post*, and was the youngest ever editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 1984. In 2007, he received a Walkley Award for journalistic leadership.

