

[Transcript] The News Agents / Fox News Lies - and Murdoch pays millions

This is a Global Player Original Podcast.

In a courtroom in Wilmington, Delaware, yesterday afternoon, life was imitating art. And for those of you who love succession, the real Logan Roy, aka Rupert Murdoch, was having to shell out nearly a billion dollars, not from Wayco, but from Fox, to settle a libel action brought by Dominion Voting Machines.

It was a moment of high drama.

We were all gathered, expecting the, let's say, trial of the century to begin.

When Dominion Voting Systems, this is a company that makes actual voting machines, had accused Fox News of airing claims that its machines, yes, its machines, were involved in a plot to steal the presidential election from Trump.

And Dominion alleged that the network broadcast that Fox knew they were false, but carried on repeating them because they didn't want to lose viewers to other networks.

At the moment where we thought the trial was about to begin, just before the opening statements, suddenly a halt and a delay and an offer is on the table.

Dominion walks away richer than it ever thought it would, and Fox has gone away without seeing its prime presenters on the stand, or having to apologize, on air.

So this is the real-life version of succession.

Welcome to the News Agents.

Fuck off.

The News Agents.

It's John.

It's Emily.

And a little bit later, we'll be talking about inflation figures and what it's doing to the price of food, just how much more expensive everything is becoming day by day.

And two weeks out from the local elections, we'll be joined by Joe Liset.

We'll be hearing his thoughts on voting and the political landscape as a whole.

But we start back in Delaware.

And this court case was going to be a blockbuster by every standard.

We were going to see Fox News' most famous stars on the stand.

Rupert Murdoch was going to be cross-examined under oath about what he knew and when.

That was tantalizing.

But at the very last second, Fox News, having accused Dominion voting machines of cancel culture by bringing this court case, suddenly decided that forking out \$787.5 million was preferable to that scenario of the drama of having to appear in court.

But also one other thing, Fox News have now avoided having to apologize on air as part of the settlement and that will be a ginormous relief to Fox News executives.

So you could say, on one hand, Fox News have had a terrible, terrible day.

On the other, they've got away with it.

Because Fox, don't forget, had denied wrongdoing by a variety of really amazing sort of explanations or excuses.

It said it was just reporting what it called newsworthy statements by President Trump and by the Trump team and that they thought that they were protected in doing so by the First Amendment of the US Constitution, which obviously protects free speech.

And I think it's worth explaining the difference, that if we say President Trump claims he has

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won an election that he has lost, obviously we are reporting speech that the President of the time believes.

If we go on air, alleging something false is not false, President Trump says the election has been stolen from him and it has, then we fall into that trap of spreading false rumours. And we should explain it's not just Fox News that Dominion are taking on.

It is Newsmax, a smaller but still pretty vibrant, pretty powerful right-wing media force and it is individuals like Rudy Giuliani, Rudolf Giuliani who was incredibly close to Trump as his personal lawyer.

It was Sidney Powell, another lawyer.

These people are facing individual lawsuits and I think what really crystallised, what really exploded the case for Fox was when a couple of months back it emerged that the very presenters who were going on air spreading these lies were in secret or off camera admitting it was all a load of bullshit and they knew Trump was lying.

What's interesting is that there was a process of disclosure where Fox News as a result of this legal action had to hand over all the internal emails and then you could suddenly do, oh what you've been saying on air every night is completely contradicted by you writing emails saying we know Donald Trump's a whack job and he's not telling the truth and it was clear as day and therefore in the US law, which is very different from British libel law, a defamation suit you have to prove malice and they suddenly Dominion could prove that, that they knew.

They weren't...

It was intentional.

They knew they were telling porkies to keep the audience in place by feeding them the Trump narrative.

So at that exact moment when a deal was made the head of Dominion went on air, no I think it was the lawyer, so at that moment the deal was struck we heard from Dominion who hailed it as a success against liars.

Today's settlement of \$787,500,000 represents vindication and accountability.

Lies have consequences.

The truth does not know red or blue.

Well that was the view of Dominion voting machines.

No one from Fox came before the microphones but they issued this statement that this settlement reflects Fox's continued commitment to the highest journalistic standards, presumably the very same high standards that have just cost them \$787.5 million because they told lies and they knew they were telling lies.

What is Rupert Murdoch thinking right now?

Where is his empire heading?

What was he scared of that made him settle at the last minute?

We're going to get into his head, into his mindset because we're joined now by David Yelland who you might remember as the former editor of the Sun newspaper, he worked in other parts of news corps as well.

But knows Rupert Murdoch pretty well, David am I right in saying that?

I mean were you surprised to see the way this ended?

Probably not.

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It's very interesting what John just said about Rupert Murdoch may not be all that displeased now I think that you're right because the money doesn't matter to him, I mean it does matter but the money isn't the thing.

The thing is protecting the Fox News audience and by that I mean first of all keeping it high which is the leading cable news channel in the US and secondly not having to go unbended knee and explain to the viewers of Fox News that they have been watching lies which they have.

So he doesn't have to tell the viewers and what I'm asking myself is what is the internal narrative that's developing within Fox News right now because that it will be having spent years working for that company.

It's very difficult not to be succession-esque about this, it really is but there will be an internal narrative, a story and the story will be whisper it, we haven't lost, we've won, they're never going to detail because the detail would mean that they made it up which they did, there's no doubt about that.

This is a disgrace, this is an absolute scandal but Rupert Murdoch will not be sitting there today thinking he's a loser at all.

Yeah, you see I guess the thing that in the run up to this trial in the process of disclosure where Dominion could demand to see internal emails and all the rest of it, we did say laid out absolutely for everyone to see the stars of the network, Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity calling Donald Trump a plonker in private and going on air and saying the election was stolen from him.

Good evening and welcome to Tucker Carlson tonight, thank you for watching, we appreciate it in case you haven't noticed it's hard to trust anything you hear right now, we've heard you, we're grateful that you trust us and we will try to be worthy of your trust.

For much of election night Donald Trump seemed to be leading in a number of key swing states then early Wednesday morning he began to fall behind.

If after all the questions have been answered it becomes clear that Joe Biden is the legitimate winner of the presidential election, we will accept that and we'll encourage others to accept it too.

As of tonight tens of millions of Americans suspect this election was stolen from them.

What we're doing in response is hardly the solution, it is making our country much more volatile, it is setting us up for something bad.

And also Rupert Murdoch knowing full well that the network was telling lies, but what a drama it would have been if they as Emily had said had been put on the stand and forced to defend themselves in a court of law.

Absolutely right, the thing that Rupert cares about more than anything are the readers, if it's a print product, the viewers, if it's in use.

So not telling the viewers as I've already said is the absolute key and for Tucker Carlson, Lou Dobbs, Maria Bartolomeo, many of these journalists, these are people I've known for a long time, they came from really good places, from CNBC, from CNN and I don't know what's happened to them or to journalism, but it has become permissible to lie, to make things up and to book people onto programs who you know lie and that's what happened here again and again and again.

But you know, to answer your question, it is necessary to preserve the emperor's new

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clothes here.

Rupert cannot afford to stand up and admit that Fox News tells lies for a living, which is what it does, it's very clear and the emails in Discovery, which you just talked about so powerfully, they show that these guys, I don't want to use the word corrupted because it's a big, big word to use about journalists, but I do think that our generation of journalists, quite a lot of us, not me, not you, but quite a lot of other people, have allowed their entire careers to be corrupted and that this is a really big problem because they have lied for a living and booked liars and it's happening here as well in certain right-wing news channels and you contrast that with the way the BBC, and I know you guys know this far better than me, any problem at the BBC is reported in massive depth, in fact it's over-reported, ex-director-general, ex-channel controls, ex-news, ex-journalist, ex-anchors, ex-everybody, all over the BBC, whereas with Fox they will maintain this sort of lie and hope they get away with it and they may well get away with it.

So why do you think, David, that Dominion stepped back from the brink then?

They could have really tightened the squeeze on Murdoch and they could have made those journalists come to trial and they could have made them apologise on air.

Why did they back down?

I think they back down because although their claim was for double the amount, Dominion is not a huge company and they got more money this way than they would have got the other way.

I think fundamentally for them it was a financial decision that it will save them a lot of money in legal fees and they've completely and utterly won.

So if someone wants to settle out of court and give you \$800 million then you've been foolish to walk away from that, I think.

David, you describe a culture at Fox News and a corruption of journalistic values.

Was it always there or has something changed?

You know Murdoch better than I do.

My understanding of him has been he was a newsman down to his fingertips, whether it's the layout of the paper, what the headline should be, what font size it should be and the rest of it.

Something has happened not just within the Murdoch company but in many other companies in the last 20 years.

I know loads of my peers who are working, I'm not naming them, who are working in this market in the UK and I watch them daily telling lies, read their columns.

Its social media has changed everything.

You can get half a million followers by being extremely right-wing.

I'm not extremely right-wing if I'm not right-wing at all and I've got about 20,000, 30,000 Twitter followers, which is nothing really.

If I decided tomorrow to be very right-wing, I've often thought of doing it as a piece of television actually.

I'd have half a million followers.

That's why they do it.

You go extreme to get the audience and then when you've got the audience you can walk into a news organisation and get a column or you can get and so it is corruption.

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Was it always like this?

No, it wasn't.

But David, it has to begin and end surely with Rupert Murdoch and it has to begin and end with Rupert Murdoch even at the Sun and I think a lot of people would be kind of horrified at the idea that Hillsborough was somehow put in parenthesis.

That kind of journalism, that moment of journalism was horrific.

It was absolutely horrific and that can be laid directly at Kelvin Mackenzie's door and at Rupert Murdoch's door.

The seeds were always there.

Well you're right and there's no doubt and when I was editing The Sun I spent a lot of time in Liverpool talking to the football club and the families and there's been a whole history of editors since then trying to put that wrong right which is impossible to do.

It's such an unforgivable thing to do.

You're right, Rupert sets the culture and he hires the people so it's his responsibility but from my experience what I'm also saying is that I think that sometimes his failure is in failing to manage very high-octane, high-earning people.

There's no command and control.

There are very little command and control in that company.

In a normal company there are non-execs but if you earn a lot of money within Newscore or Fox, if you earn a lot of money for the company, you build something and it makes a lot of money, you're a god, nobody says boo to your goose and that's the problem.

Let me just ask you, do you think anything will change editorially in Fox now?

We saw that statement.

We saw Jake Tapper, the CNN anchor, could barely read it out without sort of corpsing on air.

This idea of upholding standards of journalism in Fox News, do you think anything will change in terms of how they operate?

I wouldn't hold your breath.

You've got to remember.

People talk about Fox being massive.

It has 2.5 million viewers at peak.

That's about half of what the News at 10 gets in the UK.

The reality is that those 2.5 million people are really important in the US and they don't care.

They don't care about any of this.

Just as Trump voters don't care about the fact that Trump could soon be realistically a criminal.

They don't care about that either.

It's quite possible that Trump is re-elected.

It's quite possible that Fox News helps in that process and just carries on.

I think that's more likely than not.

The rest of us, of course, can see the truth, but that doesn't necessarily mean that Fox is...

The Murdochs need Fox.

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It's their biggest earner.

The only focus that I know this without a doubt, the focus for Rupert and Lachlan, Murdoch right now, is going to be on the viewers.

What do we tell them?

Do we tell them anything or not at all?

How are they reacting?

They'll be polling.

They'll be talking to them.

They'll be using all the very expensive people to find out what they think.

If they hold steady, which I think they will, by the way, then they'll be fine.

If Rupert falls off his yacht tomorrow, he's not going to remember very well, is he?

I think they need to think about that because he has contributed a lot of positives.

Sky, all these things, choice, anybody that watches Premiership Football, in fact, any major sport in the US, he's completely revolutionized the way we look at television.

He's completely revolutionized journalism.

Every single journalist that works in the UK makes more money because of Rupert Murdoch, because of the whopping revolution, because of Sky, it's allowed all of us to have very interesting and fulfilling lives, but he's not going to remember for any of that.

Well, if he falls off his yacht tomorrow, David, we'd love to have you back.

Well, he's going to be remembered as the person that spooned American democracy at the moment, and that's not nice, is it?

That's not a good thing.

David, thank you so much.

Thank you.

Thanks a lot.

Thank you.

So the man who gave you the Premier League or the man who endangered democracy?

Or possibly both?

Or certainly both.

We'll be back in just a moment.

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back.

And if you were tuning into the radio or TV this morning, a lot of people were waiting for the headline inflation figure.

I kind of think if you put it in more real terms, if you're going to the supermarket and you're loading up with food, then the cost of cheese has gone up by about 49% since March last year, milk up 40%, broccoli up 32%, eggs up 25%.

Food inflation is just shocking and terrifying, and Lewis has joined us in the studio and you'd be looking at some of these figures as well.

Yeah, look, the longer story of this and the reason why, there's two reasons why these figures are worrying.

One is the kind of like, to use a grand term, macroeconomic reason, the fact that most analysts thought that inflation would be falling faster than it is.

It's still over 10%, 10.1%.

That is the highest in the G7.

We'll come back to that in the politics and economics of that.

But at the kind of micro level, at the individual level, as you say, John, people going day after day to the supermarkets, getting their food, there will, of course, this will be no surprise whatsoever, that food inflation, which is the primary driver of the overall macro inflation we're seeing, is now at its worst for 45 years, the worst since 1977.

Food prices are going up by 9.2% on an annualized basis, a fifth.

And when you back to that into the fact that we've already had so many years of generally speaking falling incomes, the fact that wages are only going up by reasonable amount, by historic standards, but only by 6% or 7% in the private sector, less in the public sector, you can just see why the squeeze, it's more than the squeeze, it's a vice right now for living standards and for family finances across the country.

Yeah, and I think the point at 7 o'clock this morning was that everyone thought we were going to hear just a squeak of good news.

It was just going to come out of two figures.

We were just going to start going down.

Remember, last time these figures came out, they were expected to fall, they didn't.

Everyone thought this time they would.

Why?

Because actually, we have seen energy costs go down.

They went up hugely after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

We all felt that with energy, petrol, oil costs.

They have come down, but food price surges have taken the place.

And it wasn't that long ago, we were talking about vegetable, salad, shortages, food in the supermarkets, those ridiculous, I mean, honestly, ridiculous pictures in 21st century Britain of people not being able to get hold of really everyday products.

And that was blamed at the time on droughts, bad weather in the places that we imported food from, even though there was plenty of food in other parts of Europe.

But I think what has happened here is that the government is kind of trying to raise our expectations that they are on top of this and there are surprises, everyone, that it's not coming down.

And I guess the question is, and this is what people very rarely do, is to say, well, hang on, what's happening in neighbouring countries?

What's happening in France or Italy or Germany or Holland or wherever it happens to be?

Are they having the same levels of food inflation that we are?

Because then you'd think, well, okay, this is a thing and that we're all suffering, but the position doesn't seem to be as bad.

Well, food inflation in other European countries is quite bad.

In some cases as bad as Britain, in other cases, not quite as bad.

But the point is in those other countries, overall inflation is better.

So that means that when even if food price inflation is bad, then at least the overall rate of inflation is much better.

So as I say, France at the moment is 6.6%.

They've got much better picture on energy prices, for example, Germany 7.8%, Italy 8.1%.

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You compare to say the US, down at 5.3%, Canada at 4.3%.

So the UK is in a very unhappy position.

It's at the top of the table, the winner of the table that you do not want to be at the top of.

And obviously that poses political questions for the government as well.

Rishi Sunak has pledged to halve inflation by the end of the year.

Now, at the time when we talked about that, we all said, well, he's basically setting a target he knew he could meet.

I still think the overall assumption with economists is that the UK should hit that if we don't, we're in trouble.

But I think the thing that's going to be really worrying both the Bank of England and the government is the idea that this inflation now is becoming embedded within the system.

Like with inflation, you can have shocks.

You can have an energy price shock.

You can have the Ukraine war.

You can have COVID.

But theoretically, as long as the inflation doesn't become embedded within the system, then a year later, the inflation should come down because of course all inflation is, is a measure of how fast prices are rising.

Exactly.

Stop rising.

Although the overall expense of things within the economy doesn't come down, at least the rate in which it's going up does.

But the fear at the moment is, is that basically, in the British example at least, inflation is creating inflation, which is creating inflation.

It becomes a vicious cycle and which is very hard to stop.

The foods that are most affected tend to be the most basic foods in terms of the rate of inflation.

Basic pasta, basic bread.

That is the stuff that is going up fastest and makes it much harder for more people.

Yeah.

And look, this now raises more pressure on the Bank of England to increase rates at the start of early May, which again makes mortgages more expensive for anyone who isn't on a fixed deal.

And so again, cost of living just gets worse and worse.

And as Emily said, bread and cereal, the most basic of all things was the biggest component of this inflation rise.

I want to take us on to something slightly different because we had Prime Minister's questions today.

And sitting next to Rishi Sunak was the Justice Secretary, Dominic Raab.

No surprise there, you might think, except that rumors are circulating.

And I've heard from very good sources that the report on whether Dominic Raab bullied his civil servants has either just come out or is about to come out and the speculation is it's going to be bad for him and could lead to his resignation.

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And I thought, well, if Dominic Raab is sitting next to Rishi Sunak at PMQs and if they know what is in that report and it is that bad, he wouldn't be sitting next to Rishi Sunak.

He would have been absent from PMQs or found a reason to be somewhere else.

The messaging on the Raab story seems to be quite contradictory.

And I think that's possibly because the outcome is still very much up in the air.

And we've heard from somebody who knows the team around Dominic Raab very well.

They're expecting it tomorrow and they expect that the Prime Minister will make a decision on what to do once the findings are sort of out there.

And I guess there are three potential outcomes.

There is exoneration, i.e. he walks free and nothing happens.

There is he's kind of screwed, he has to go completely.

Or there is the third one, which they're really expecting and they term that muddling, i.e. he won't be exonerated, he will probably have to be removed from the Department of Justice.

But it isn't clear what would happen then or how Rishi Sunak moves him to another Department without that problem being seen to follow him there.

So I think that's the situation in.

And if we are getting conflicting sort of reports of what's happening, it might be because even the Prime Minister hasn't 100% decided at this point which of the three outcomes he is most likely to pursue.

And coming up next, we will be talking to someone who is outside the Cabinet, none other than our old friend Joe Lysett.

Welcome back.

And in an earlier part of this bumper episode of the news agents, we talked about how life was imitating art.

Well, now we've got art imitating art, I guess.

Art in a very finely crafted knitted jumper.

I think we've given away who we're talking to now.

We are joined in the studio again joyously by late night Lysett.

Ah joyously, I like that.

Thank you very much.

Joyously.

How are you?

I'm very well.

I'm sort of having the time of my life at the minute.

I've got a schedule which I never have normally because as a stand-up you kind of getting bits of work here and there and actually this show is Monday to Friday, you know, go in and start work on it on Monday, do it Friday night, weekends of my own.

I feel like a proper person with a job.

When we spoke to you last, it was right in the heat of it all.

Yeah, yeah.

Do you think that there has been a backlash about the whole Qatar project now?

It was an amazing football final.

Yeah.

Right, for people who loved football, it kind of worked.

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And I wonder whether you end up kind of thinking sound and fury, we didn't do anything. Yeah, I mean, yeah, sometimes I do think that, but the thing is I don't know. Ultimately, I don't know, but I'm still glad that I did it and I'm still proud of the fact that I raised awareness of that thing at that time because what else is there to do? Like, I might just go like, fine, I'm happy with this. You were wondering out loud kind of how the pieces would fall and whether the Beckham people reach out to you and what they would say. I just wonder what the fallout has been. I mean, it was much bigger than I could have hoped for really. So were there any negative parts of it for you? Yeah, I mean, I found a lot of it. I mean, someone who suffers with anxiety, I found a lot of the press heat and press attention was sort of new to me in that way. And it still lingers on now. I still feel like there's a sort of threat from, I'm on a list now of like people that the right-wing press would happily write an article having a go at. And that sort of still continues to this day. And that's not a place that I'd been in before really. And I wasn't, and that's new. And I find that sort of scary. So what's interesting is you do that in your work anyway. I think we're going to play a little bit of your show. Yes. Oh, lovely. GB News, I'm guessing, is the target of your satire. Talk TV, GB News, these places, yeah, yeah. Let's have a listen. Hello, I'm Richard Dutry. Nothing was proved. This is the part of the show where you hear from straight talking, from straight people. We're the people that are being silenced and you can tell we're being silenced because every time you turn on your telly, you can hear us going on very loudly about how we're being silenced. When you send up, when you satirize GB News or talk TV or whatever, is it done with fondness and with kindness? I'm asking because we're now looking at the Fox settlement, right, in the US, where clearly what Fox did was so egregious that they lied about an election result. So I'm trying to work out where Joe Lysett sits on, whether you think we are foxifying or whether you just think that's a bit of fun. In relation to the news output of the UK, I think we are foxifying, definitely. I met the guy that runs Politico Jack Blanchard, I think his name is, and he was saying that it all got a bit boring. People aren't resigning and that news output and ratings in news require disaster, require things going wrong, require not all the time, but like people presumably tune in

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more when things are going wrong to the news agents.

So I sort of do feel like there is a commercial benefit to things going wrong, to things like Brexit, to things like the asylum seeker crisis, all of these things actually help news outlets and put money into certain pockets. And so I think it does benefit places like GB News, talk TV to kind of fire up those and sort of put some kerosene on those things.

And so I don't always believe that their coverage is honest or genuine about that they actually care about these things.

I think it's helpful to them financially, ultimately.

When you're sending up GB News in your satire, there's a sort of a gentle approach to it, right?

Is it? Would you call it gentle?

Well, yeah, I mean, I'm a gentle person.

I'm not, I don't know how it could be more aggressive.

What are your ideas there? Physical attacks?

Yeah, I'm not a fan of GB News, I don't think they're a fan of mine particularly, so I don't think that's a surprise.

And I also just think they're easily, it's so fun to write that Richard Euterie segment because you just basically write the opposite of what is kind and decent and just throw in a few extra sort of silly words.

But do you welcome them being part of the whole media landscape conversation?

No, I don't think they're, no, I sort of feel they're disingenuous and to call themselves GB News.

I mean, it's not news output, is it? It's opinion.

And I know that they've got some sort of quirk in the way that they market themselves, so they can say that they're GB News, but it's not news.

It's a very interesting question because, you know, if you think of the way that Ofcom regulates, say, Sky, BBC, ITV, you think, hang on, is that the same Ofcom that is regulating GB News where it looks like, feels like, the rules are very different when you've got, you know, Jacob Rees-Mogg and this minute ex-minister and that ex-minister coming on and giving their own shows and giving their own platforms to express their views?

Yeah.

That's all from us for now, but tomorrow we're going to be talking to the man whose mum is about to become Queen. And that's just such a weird thing to say. He calls King Charles his stepdad and he's coming on to talk about food, the coronation, menus, all the complicated things that go into the planning of-

I think you've missed the really important bit of the conversation.

That his son is a Matt Tottenham fan like me. That was the bit that matters, surely?

Yeah. This is where I nearly lost the whole episode to Spurs. Bye for now.

Bye-bye.