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Of pots and kettles in a digital age [1]

Written by **Jan Boucek** [2] | Sunday 10 October 2010

The BBC?s director-general Mark Thompson has been urging the government this week to prevent Rupert Murdoch?s News Corp from taking full control of British Sky Broadcasting. According to press reports, Mr Thompson will also sign a letter from non-Murdoch newspaper groups to Business Secretary Vince Cable, decrying the proposed acquisition.

In an interview in the US, Mr Thompson warned of an abuse of power should the deal go through. Yes, the Rupert Murdoch bogeyman is alive and well! Governments rise and fall with his changing moods. British culture is threatened by populist dross. Profits drive out the noble Reithian mission.

But this is surely a case of the pot calling the kettle black. Consider the facts. Most recent figures show the BBC?s television audience with a dominant 30.7% market share and a crushing 55% in radio. For television, ITV trails BBC at 23.2% while all the various Sky channels ? general, sports and movies ? are way back at 6.7%.
As for the newspapers, this is clearly a dying industry fighting yesterday?s battles. In its most recent annual report, News Corp reported revenues at its UK newspapers fell 2%. Yes, profits increased somewhat but this was due to what News Corp called ?cost containment initiatives.? In other words, they?re shrinking in accordance with the new reality.

The alliance of Mr Thompson and the non-Murdoch newspapers smacks of vested interests seeking to protect their historic dominance of news and culture. They blame the unrelenting and ruthless Mr Murdoch when, in fact, the threat comes from the unrelenting and ruthless advance of technology.

No one knows better than Mr Murdoch about the threats from technology. He blew a bundle on what was then the biggest social networking site MySpace, only to see it soon overtaken by Facebook. In the UK, BSkyB is a leader in providing alternative satellite distribution of new TV channels but Freeview still offers a cheaper alternative.

Meanwhile, BSkyB?s aggressive rollout of high definition TV and now 3D TV is outflanked by the appeal of the decidedly poorer quality of YouTube. Mr Murdoch is a big influential player in modern media but, in seeking protection from the government, Mr Thompson and his newspaper friends are fighting yesterday?s battles and missing the bigger picture.

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