

PAY TV PIRACY

Financial Review Special Investigation

Social media shows its mettle

Reaction

Ben Woodhead and
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Tweets, hashtags and internet clouds can sound a bit remote, if not silly, to people who aren't engaged in the day-to-day online social media. But its power was underlined on Thursday when media titan Rupert Murdoch sprung to the defence of his global empire not in one of his papers or on Fox TV, but directly and personally via Twitter.

In the early hours of the morning on March 28, the *Financial Review* published explosive pay TV piracy revelations, backed by a selection of emails taken from more than 14,000 messages, detailing pay TV piracy activities within News Corp's NDS unit.

The emails were posted to the afr.com website for download and hosted on US-based DocumentCloud, an internet – or cloud-based – service that media organisations around the world use to publish pri-

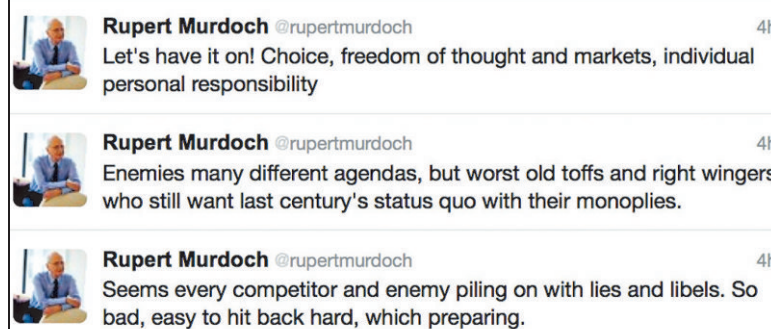
mary sources supporting news stories. Shortly after, British Labour MP and outspoken News Corp critic Tom Watson reported the release of the documents using Twitter, asking the more than 70,000 followers of his @tom_watson message stream to download and explore the emails.

"Australian Financial Review needs help with crowdsourcing a review of some interesting emails!" Watson posted, referring to the practice of using online crowds to solve problems and analyse information through distributed networks.

Watson's Tweet, and others, quickly spread the news, allowing the *Financial Review's* reports to rapidly move throughout the world.

In little more than an hour, word of the release of the emails, and the emails themselves, had spread across the globe, sparking countless independent investigations and verifications of the allegations in the *Financial Review*. Under siege from a triple-hit of stories, including those in the *Financial Review*, a related pro-

Tweets



Rupert Murdoch reacts on Twitter yesterday to what he called "lies and libels".

gram on the BBC's *Panorama*, and a separate program on PBS's *Frontline* in the US, News Corp chairman Rupert Murdoch took to Twitter himself on Thursday to defend the organisation against what he described as "lies and libels". "Seems every competitor and enemy piling on with lies and libels. So bad, easy to hit back hard, which preparing," he said in one of a string of somewhat cryptic Tweets from his @rupertmurdoch account on Thursday afternoon.

"Enemies many different agendas, but worst old toffs and right wingers who still want last century's status quo with their monopolies [sic]," he said in a separate Tweet. "Let's have it on! Choice, freedom of thought and markets, individual personal responsibil-

ity," he said in another. Mr Murdoch has more than 200,000 Twitter followers.

But while News prepares the counterattack promised by Mr Murdoch, the internet buzz around its activities shows no signs of cooling.

Among those to receive Watson's Tweet was a poster to the US-based DailyKos politics website which, under the online name ceebs, encouraged readers to download the emails and get digging.

Others have followed suit and over the course of the past two days thousands of Tweets have conveyed news of the pay TV hacking scandal to hundreds of thousands of Twitter users, from the casual consumer to politicians and media figures, including

A mass of detail that goes well beyond even the forensic efforts of Panorama!

The Guardian

senior staff at *The New York Times*, *Guardian* and the *Financial Times*.

"The *Financial Review's* investigative media reporter Neil Chenoweth has been working on the story for the past four years and his article contains a mass of detail that goes well beyond even the forensic efforts of *Panorama*," Britain's *The Guardian* said.

Numerous other social sites, including Facebook, Google+ and content aggregator Reddit, have also helped push the *Financial Review's* scoops out to an audience that would have struggled to discover the stories in the not-so-distant past. Already the activity has sparked other news breaks, including a report in *The Independent* detailing an NDS payment to Surrey Police for "assistance given to us in our work".

Doubtless there are more scoops to come over the coming months.

To follow the *Financial Review* on Twitter and Facebook, go to <http://www.twitter.com/financialreview> and <http://www.facebook.com/financialreview> ■

Raiders of the internet, no smartcard required

Comment

John Davidson

You don't need a dodgy smartcard, a degree in mathematics or a job at NDS to be a pay TV pirate nowadays. Anyone with a broadband internet connection fast enough to stream video can do it.

For pre-recorded content, the BitTorrent file-sharing system is still a popular way for viewers to bypass the security on pay TV. Someone with a valid pay TV subscription, or perhaps someone in a market where the show is broadcast free-to-air, simply records the program, converts it to a compressed format

that's easier to download, and then shares it with other BitTorrent users, who share it with other BitTorrent users, until it's widely and unstopably available.

Recent crackdowns on popular BitTorrent indexing sites such as BT Junkie have made it harder to find pirated files, but not impossible. Other indexing sites such as Pirate Bay are still online, seemingly out of reach of prosecutors. (Pirate Bay recently announced it would send its servers into orbit, if need be, to evade the long arm of the law.)

But BitTorrent can't be used to share live sports broadcasts in real time, when most people want to watch them. Illegal live-sports

internet streaming sites pop up on the internet, only to be closed down, Whack-A-Mole-style, by authorities.

When all else fails, there are always "lifecasting" websites, such as Justin.tv, that allow users to set up video cameras and stream whatever is in front of the camera onto the internet, where it can be watched free of charge by thousands of other internet users.

What's in front of the camera could be anything: paint drying or someone sleeping or playing a video game. But it might equally be someone sitting in front of his or her TV, which just happens to be tuned to a pay-per-view boxing match or a football game that's only

being broadcast on a pay TV channel.

Lifecasters on those sites can get banned for broadcasting copyrighted content (Justin.tv says it has special filters installed on its site which can detect such content), but then new users appear who like to film themselves watching pay TV, and the Whack-A-Mole hunt continues.

Of course, the internet hasn't just helped the pirates. Even the pay TV companies have embraced the internet and are using it to deliver subscription services that are often at a lower cost than traditional cable and satellite pay TV services.

While Foxtel still offers its pay

TV service over cable to smartcard-secured set-top boxes, most of its recent product launches have been for internet-based devices such as Telstra's T-Box set-top box, Microsoft's Xbox 360 games console, or (soon) for Samsung's smart TVs. Foxtel's Xbox-based offering uses the games console's own hard-to-crack security rather than smartcards to protect the data stream from pirates.

But whether the security is crackable or not hardly matters. Nowadays, pay TV piracy is as much about using the internet to stroll around sophisticated security systems as it is about trying to hack through them.

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